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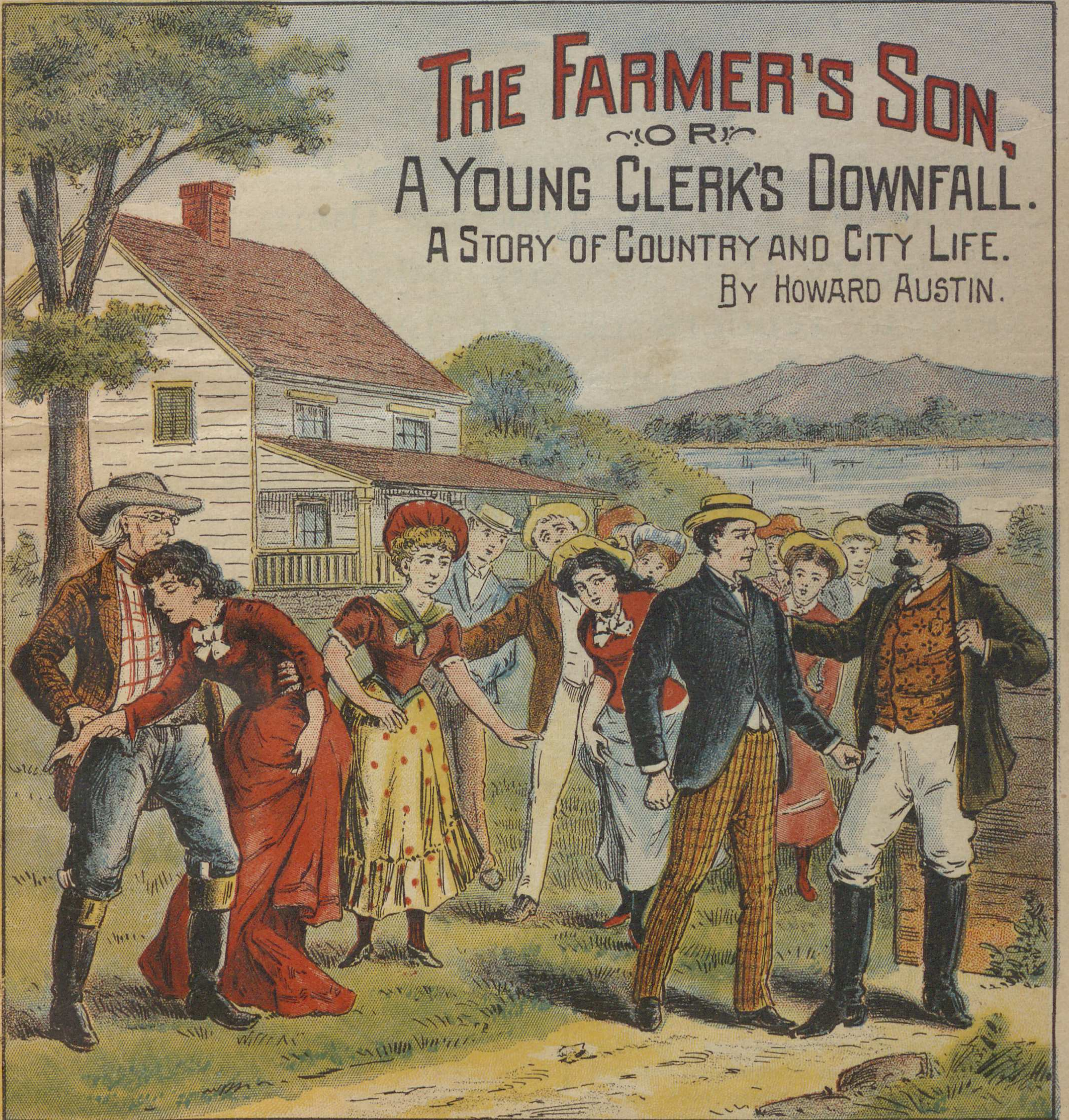
Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, by Frank Tousey.

No. 137.

NEW YORK, JANUARY 16, 1901.

Price 5 Cents.

THE FARMER'S SON, OR A YOUNG CLERK'S DOWNFALL. A STORY OF COUNTRY AND CITY LIFE. BY HOWARD AUSTIN.



"A warrant for my arrest! Surely there must be some mistake, Mr. Blake!" Howard cried
"Yes, yes, it must be so," said Uncle Peter. "No, Howard is accused of robbing the
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Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office, November 7, 1898. Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1901, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York.

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CHAPTER I.

AT THE HOME OF THE FARMER

"Shew! Shew! Git out, there! There's Jones' hogs in the garden again. Seems to me that boy, Nat Smudge, can't do nothin' but whistle. He's left the garden gate open again an' them pesky hogs are rootin' up all the cabbage plants. Oh, there he comes out of the barn. You, Nat, drive out them hogs an' fasten the gate, an' then fly around an' drive up the cows. Whew! This has been about the hottest day this summer. Jist hand me a glass of buttermilk, Tilda. I'm enenmost sweltered out, come right down to it."

Farmer Weatherall threw off his big straw hat and wiped the sweat from his brow with a large red handkerchief, and set down on a bench near the farmhouse door.

"Well, Peter, it's right down hot. I don't recollect nothin' like it since that Sunday two year ago last harvest, when Bija Homewool's darter Jane was married to Deacon Goodweed's oldest son by his first wife, and that day, you remember, the old gray mare dropped right down in the traces. But here's the buttermilk."

Matilda Weatherall, Uncle Peter Weatherall's old maid sister, whom every one about Cloverdell called "Aunt Tilda," just as they did her brother "Uncle Peter," took the cover off the churn, which stood under the apple tree by the spring house, and dipped out a tin cup full of Uncle Peter's favorite beverage.

Uncle Peter smacked his lips over it, and Aunt Tilda seated herself upon the porch, took up a pan of strawberries and began "looking them over," while she went on:

"How we do miss Howard on the farm, Peter. He used to be the life of the old homestead. Always so cheerful and light-hearted, with a kind word and a smile for every one. I am real glad it's Saturday night again, for Howard will be home from Clingville to spend Sunday at the old homestead. That boy has got his mother's disposition, Peter, if ever a boy had."

"Yes, Tilda, Howard is like his sainted mother, who sleeps under the great oak in the grove yonder, and I'd be a lonely old man if it wasn't for my boy. I tell ye, Tilda, I feel sad sometimes when I remember the happy days when my dear wife, Howard's mother, was with us."

"What, tears, Peter! Now don't get down-hearted, for——"

"How de do, Tilda? How de do, Peter? Pesky warm now, ain't it? Ain't seed sich a scorcher since the Fourth of July when the heat melted the steeple off on the Baptis' church down tu Squanza."

A lean, lank, white-haired, smooth-faced old fellow with a humorous twinkle in his little blue eyes, and who was attired in a costume of a period away beyond our grandfathers' days entered the yard and came to the farmhouse door.

"How de do, Abner?" said Aunt Tilda, with an old-fashioned courtesy. "Take a seat. He! he! What whoppin' yarns yew do tell."

"How de do, Ab Stubbs? Lively as a cricket, ain't ye?"

"Putty middlin', Peter. But it's the truth 'bout ther Baptis'

meetin'-house, Tilda, an' I could prove it, too, if old Bill Jones was alive."

"Mighty safe you are to say so, Ab Stubbs, for old Bill Jones been dead nigh on to twenty years."

"Well, that hain't his fault," chuckled Ab Stubbs.

"I see you have been to the village, for you've got your newspaper in your pocket. What's the news? Wonder if Lige Whitbeck's sold that prime yoke o' oxen of hisen," said Uncle Peter.

"I didn't see nothin' of Lige, but I met Josiah Perkins. Darn his pieter. The old fool was prancin' round the post office just like a turkey gobbler in spring time, 'cause he'd bought a new suit of store clothes an' had um on for the fust time."

"Why is it you an' Josiah can't agree, Ab? At your ages you two old boys ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You can't come within gun shot of each other without quarrelin'," said Uncle Peter.

He gave Aunt Tilda a sly poke, and that worthy, though somewhat ancient maiden lady looked self-conscious, though suddenly the berries she was preparing for supper seemed to demand her exclusive attention.

"I don't like to see an old feller like Josiah Perkins puttin' on sich airs. Then the critter actually told Elder Smedley's boy Mathew—the one that clerks in the post office, you know—that he was comin' up here to-night to call on Tilda."

"Ha! ha! You had better look sharp, Ab, or Josiah will cut you out. Store clothes go a long way with the women folks, they do, by gosh!" said Uncle Peter, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"Now, Peter, what nonsense you do talk," Aunt Matilda hastened to say.

"Well, well, you young folks may think so. Hello! there's the cows comin' up the lane, and Nat Smudge a-whistling behind 'em as usual," remarked Uncle Peter.

"Drat that Nat Smudge. He's allers around when I call to see Tilda. Now I s'pose he'll turn up when Peter goes to look to the cows," muttered Ab Stubbs, aside.

"Tilda, I hear you're a-goin' to have a leetle company to-night in honor of Howard's comin' home for Sunday."

"Yes, Ab. The neighbors' young folks are comin' in. Won't you stay an' take tea an' see Howard?"

"Well, I don't care if I do, seein' it's yew, Tilda. 'Tain't once a year I go visitin' 'cept comin' here, Tilda."

"Well, you know we are always glad to see you, Abner."

"Tilda, just put some soft-soap in the washdish, and hang up a new towel or two by the well-curb. The men will be in from the harvest field pretty soon and want to wash up a bit for supper," said Uncle Peter.

"I'll git things ready for them, Peter," replied Aunt Tilda.

"You an' Ab 'ull have to excuse me till I tend to the chores. Can't depend on that boy, Nat Smudge, to do anything but whistle," remarked Uncle Peter.

"Oh, Biddy McCrea from America! Trol, trol, trol! da! oh! Trol, trol, tra!"

sang a voice with a strong Milesian accent, and a jolly milk-

maid, who was evidently a recent importation, tripped out of the farmhouse with a milking stool and bucket in her hands.

"Good avenin', Misther Stubbs. Trol, trol, trol——"

The vision vanished through the gate.

"That gal! What with Maggie O'Tool's singing and Nat Smudge's whistlin', I'm enemost out o' my wits sometimes, Abner."

"Do tell, Tilda! 'Pears like a pert critter, too, right smart on her pins. I swan to man, I thought she winked!"

Ab Stubbs straightened up and looked like a conqueror.

"Abner Stubbs, I am ashamed of you. The idea."

The old boy looked abashed.

"I'm a leetle near-sighted, Tilda. Onct took a white horse for a snow bank an' didn't find it out until the critter reached out and fotched me one with his hind legs."

"I wish you were more truthful, Abner."

"'Tis the truth, an' I could prove it, too, if old Bill Jones was alive. But, now say, Tilda. Do you know I thought I'd come over to-night and—and——"

Ab hesitated. He had hesitated at about the same point for twenty years.

"Well, Abner," encourageingly, and leaning a trifle nearer.

"Gosh all hemlocks! I can't git up the courage to do it," thought Ab.

"Here I made up my mind to come over an' pop the question to Tilda to-night 'fore that durned Josiah Perkins come in his new store clothes, but now I'm here I feel like hidin' right down in my boot tops. But as old Bill Jones used to say, 'Here goes if I break a trace,' " he said to himself.

"You was a sayin', Abner," remarked Aunt Tilda.

"Eh—ah—ah, yes, I thought, Tilda, as you and I had knowed each other for a good many years now, and—and——"

"Yes, Abner."

"And allers been 'bout as good friends as the run o' folks that—that——"

"Yes—yes, we've allers been very good friends, Abner."

"Well, you see, I thought to-night I'd tell you I—I—I have concluded to fix up my house a leetle this spring, and I thought I'd ask you to—to—to tell me what color you think 'ud look good."

"Oh, is that all?"

There was a world of expression in the remark.

"Well, Abner, I think green is the color that will suit you."

"Do tell! Yes, that's what I thought; an' I thought I'd ask you, after I got my house fixed up—painted green, with yeller shutters—and got a half dozen new cane seat chairs fer the parlor, and a new ingrain kerpit, I thought I'd ask you if you——"

"Whew-e-ew! whe-e-ew! whe-e-e!"

Thus whistling away as he always was when not eating or talking, Nat Smudge, the farm chore boy, came into the yard, went to the well, with its old-fashioned sweep and mosscovered bucket, and began to draw a pail of water.

Aunt Tilda looked vexed and Ab Stubbs was mad. He had never come as near a real pop as now. The old boy unwound his legs, which he had twisted together like a grapevine, and jumped up.

Aunt Tilda started for the kitchen door.

"'Scuse me for a minit, Abner; I smell the short-cake I'm bakin' for supper burnin'. That gal Maggie must have left the kivers on the cook stove," she said.

"Drat that boy's pictur! Shet up!" cried Ab, turning to the comical urchin at the well, who seemed to have outgrown his clothes several years previously, and who kept on whistling the same whistle without tune or change.

"Yer won't, won't yer!" and with that the exasperated old boy picked up a cucumber which lay with others on a bench near the farmhouse door and hurled it at the overgrown urchin at the well.

Nat dodged the first cucumber, but Ab threw another that hit him in the neck, and he took to his heels, still whistling.

The bucket was overturned in his flight and rolled toward Ab, who stumbled against it and then gave it a furious kick.

"Oh! Oh! my corns!" roared Ab, the next moment hopping about on one foot.

"Why, Abner, whatever is the matter?"

Aunt Tilda reappeared from the farmhouse as she spoke.

"I'm dead!" groaned Ab.

"A lively corpse. What nonsense!"

"Well, I just kicked the bucket."

The sound of a hearty young voice was heard at that moment, and Uncle Peter and a fine handsome young man of twenty-one entered through the gate arm in arm.

"Home again, Aunt Tilda!" cried the youth.

"Oh, Howard! How glad I am to see you!" answered Aunt Tilda, as she greeted her nephew affectionately.

"How de do, Howard?" cried Ab Stubbs.

"How are you, Ab? You look more sprightly the older you grow, I declare," answered Howard Weatherall, while Ab worked his arm as if it was a pump handle.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGER AT THE FARM

"Dressed right up like the picturs in the papers Den Kiggins gits frum Bosting, ain't ye, Howard? Must be doin' right well up in Clingville, eh?"

"Well, Ab, I think I have succeeded pretty well in the village, for a farmer's son," replied Howard, modestly, while he laughed at old Ab's characteristic comment.

Howard Weatherall had a good, honest face. There was a strong resemblance between his features and those of his father, Uncle Peter. But Howard had inherited something of his deceased mother's beauty, and a better looking young man would have been hard to find in all New Hampshire.

"The boy has done well. He's a good son, Ab, and he's made his own way by stickin' to the principles of honesty and industry he learned here on the farm," said Uncle Peter, proudly, and he followed Howard with a fond glance full of paternal affection as he turned away with Aunt Tilda for a moment.

"Yes, Peter, Howard's a son to be proud on. He's all wool and a yard wide, as old Bill Jones used to say."

"It 'pears to me I've heard Howard's got a better place in the Clingville Bank lately. Wonder if he has, now?" added old Ab.

"Yes, Ab, the boy entered the service of the bank as an entry clerk."

"Gosh, do they have a clerk for the entry of the bank, too, Peter?"

"Oh, no. Howard commenced as one of the bookkeepers."

"Good job, too, I guess, wan't it?"

"Yes, for an opening. But Howard's been faithful and honest as the day is long, and the bank folks appreciated him. Jeewhittaker, Ab, the boy's cashier now!"

"Want to know? He'll be president of the consarn yet. But Clingville's a putty rusty place for a young man, Peter, an' chuck full of temptations."

"True enough, Ab, but Howard is proof against them all. You know the record of the Weatherall family for three generations, Ab, an' you never heard of a dishonest Weatherall."

"No, Peter, never. It's honest stock. Old Bill Jones would bear me out in sayin' so if he was alive, too."

"It is puttin' a sort of a temptation in the way to give such a mere boy as Howard the control of the funds of the bank as

cashier, but then he's a true Weatherall, and I shall never have cause to blush for my only boy."

"Never, Peter, I'm sure of that."

Meanwhile Howard and Aunt Tilda had been conversing.

"I've invited some of the neighboring young folks in to spend the evening, Howard, and you may be sure I did not forget Ruth Everheart, the squire's daughter."

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Tilda. You are the confidant of all my secrets, so I won't deny that I am very much pleased. Ruth is the sweetest girl I know."

"I knew you thought so. And now you're getting on, and hev been 'pinted cashier of the Clingville Bank, I don't see what's to hinder."

"Hinder what, Aunt Tilda?"

"Why my sakes, don't you understand? I mean there is nothing to hinder your courtin' Ruth."

"I hope not. But the squire may not agree with you. You know he is a purse-proud old fellow, aunt."

"Well, I guess the Weatheralls are just as good as the Everhearts, anyway. I remember more than twenty years ago they wasn't nobody. Why, the squire's father, old Jake Everheart, used to tramp all the way from his shingle-mill to town to carry home a sack of flour on his back for mush."

"But you like Ruth?"

"Oh, yes, she's a right smart gal. Sensible as she is good-lookin' too."

"Well, Aunt Tilda, I owe you one for your kindness in getting up a little party for me so that I might have an opportunity to meet Ruth. How shall I repay you? Oh, I have it! I'll spur Ab Stubbs or Josiah Perkins up to come to the point. Now which shall it be, Aunt Tilda? Better late than never."

"Go 'long. You're full of nonsense."

"But now I must go in and look to the supper; Abner is a-going to eat with us, and you know how that man does eat when he comes here," added Aunt Tilda.

"Well, I'll give Abner a hint."

"If you do!" and Aunt Tilda entered the house, shaking her finger warningly.

Almost immediately supper was announced, but Howard had previously retired to his room in the dear old homestead which he loved so well to rid himself of the stains of travel.

"Supper! Come right in now, Peter and Abner, an' sit right up an' eat while the buskits are hot. Howard's ready," said Aunt Tilda, at the door.

"Gosh! I'll hev to wash up 'fore I eat, Peter," said Abner.

"Well, be quick about it, for if there's anything that riles Tilda, it's to have any one keep a meal waitin' when it's ready."

"This is the soft-soap barrel, ain't it? Yes, I see it is. All right. I'll wash up in less than a whisk of a lamb's tail."

Ab dipped the tin washdish into the barrel of rain water under the eaves, and in a moment he was puffing and blowing like a porpoise as he plunged his face into the water.

A moment or so later the family with the exception of the hired help were at the table.

Maggie O'Tool came from the barnyard with the milk pail in her hand.

The Irish maid had paused to get a drink at the well in the yard when whistling Nat Smudge came down the lane without and hastily joined her.

"Bet a dollar an' a half he's comin' here, Maggie!" cried Nat.

"Who's comin' here? Look out, the milk pail is foreninst ye!"

Nat, in his awkward, blundering way, had almost stumbled over the milk pail.

"Who is it yez are talkin' about, you big, overgrown calf?"

"Aunt Tilda calls me a donkey, you call me a calf, and Uncle

Peter calls me a jackass. You all want to make a menagerie of me. I won't tell you nothin', so I won't."

"Don't get mad, that's a good gossoon."

Nat wriggled around the corner of the well-curb until he was by her side.

"I kinder like you, Maggie," he said, sheepishly.

"Sure an' that wasn't what you came to tell me?"

"No, but it's so, anyhow."

Nat edged a little nearer to the buxom milkmaid.

"Git out wid yez! You're only a boy—a boy too big for his pants."

"I don't care. Aunt Tilda says I can wear sleeve buttons next winter."

"Hawk!"

Some one uttered a cough that seemed to start at a distance and draw near until it sounded like the report of a shotgun.

"Ough! Ough!"

Maggie screamed.

"That's wot I was agoin' to tell yer was a-comin', Maggie," said Nat.

She glanced toward the gate.

"Mercy me soul, Nat! It's wan av Uncle Peter's scarecrows from the cornfield!"

"It's a tramp, that's wot it is, Maggie."

"I'll run tell Uncle Peter," Nat added.

The author of the graveyard cough stole forward and opened the gate.

He was a rare specimen of the genus tramp. A wayfarer was he. A stranger to a bath, the foe of cleanliness. A pilgrim on life's highway who had been left out in the race for respectability. He was tattered and torn as though on his travels he had recently encountered a cyclone. No festive "tonsorial artist" had recently trifled with his hair or beard. The old stained and frayed linen duster was buttoned to the chin. His toes had rebelled against imprisonment in the ancient cast-off shoes he wore and were striking out on their own account. There was an odor of bad whisky and stale tobacco that heralded his approach. But for all his rags, dirt and degradation, it could be easily seen that the tramp was a well-built young man, and there was a good-natured, jolly expression upon his grimy face. In fact he habitually wore a broad grin.

"It's alive so it is!" cried Maggie.

She started to retreat, for Nat had already entered the farmhouse.

"Stay, maiden fair. Do not thus hasten thy departure," said the tramp, bowing with mock gallantry.

"What do yez want?" demanded Maggie, still backing toward the door.

"Ah, and 'tis a daughter of Erin we have met."

"I'm an honest Irish girl, sur."

"No doubt of that, fair damsel. Not the slightest in the world."

"You'd better be off or Uncle Peter may set the dog on yez."

"The dog! Ah, ha! 'Tis man's ingratitude to man makes countless thousands 'run,' " exclaimed the tramp, tragically.

"Hello! Whence comes the sound of footsteps," he added.

"Uncle Peter's comin'."

"Thrice welcome to his royal nibbs. Adieu! adoise, adissimo, fair Rosamond," said the tramp, kissing his grimy hand thrice with the air of a stage gallant.

"Sure, and it's a gentleman he is for all his rags," said Maggie, as she entered the house, passing Uncle Peter as he came out.

"Hello! Waal, by gosh, stranger, you look like you'd seen a hard winter. What do you want?" asked Uncle Peter.

"Kind sir, respected agricultural friend, 'tis much I crave, but little I would ask."

"You're a tramp, ain't ye? Look strong an' rugged too."

"Hawk!"

"Gee whittaker, stranger! You're booked for the other shore. Consumption, ain't it?" said Uncle Peter, as the tramp fired off one of his graveyard coughs.

"Guess I must hev left the bars down last night."

"Bars, eh?"

Do not misapprehend me. 'Tis not of the festive bar where the weary pilgrim who hath a nickel in his clothes may pause to dally with the foamy tankard that I speak."

"Eh—no?"

"No; I slept on the wrong side—that's all."

"Where did you pass the night?"

"At Widow Green's."

"Widow Green's? Guess you made a mistake in the name, stranger."

"Why so, uncle?"

"Because there is no Widow Green in these parts."

"Ah, ha! Me language needeth modification, I perceive. Know then, good sir, we gentlemen travelers call the green hayfield in which we seek the shelter of a friendly stack when the shades of night are falling Widow Green's."

"Oh, I see. Well, you're a putty jolly feller, if you are hard up."

"Never repine, let it rain or shine. An inadvertent rhyme, but let it pass."

CHAPTER III.

AN UNWELCOME GUEST

"Keen, keen as a chestnut burr, by chowder! Young man, you seem to be a too likely sort of a chap for the sort of life you lead."

"You don't know me, uncle?" the tramp grinned.

"Well, who are you? Where are you from, and what's your name?"

"You spring 'em on me too fast. But, aged sire, my strange history will I tell. I am a gentleman of leisure, vulgarly, a tramp, if you will. A traveler who goes everywhere, sees everything and yet pays nothing. A jolly vagabond, for whom all the good people are working, a prince in disguise if it suits you better, but with a light heart, a lighter purse, a joke for every frown, everybody's friend, and known by all the wide world over as Happy Jack, the rover."

The tramp doffed his hat with courtly grace, as he uttered the concluding words and bowed low with one hand upon his heart.

"Slick—slick as a greased pole. Missed your callin', young fellow. You ought to hev' been a Pheledelphia lawyer."

"Thanks. You do me proud."

"Now sit down. I want to talk to you a bit, young man. But tell me if you need food or drink?" said Uncle Peter, seriously.

"Both do I crave. But if you ask me to drink I say unani-mously yes."

"There's the well. Help yourself."

"Water! Bah! But hold, I will try it."

Happy Jack went to the well, dipped a tin cup which hung on the curb into a well-filled bucket, and raised the cup toward his lips.

But he paused. It was only force of habit, and he said:

"Join me?"

But Uncle Peter shook his head.

Happy Jack drank, but the first drop that touched his throat seemed to surprise his system and give him a shock.

He gave one of his tremendous coughs and Uncle Peter started in alarm.

"It don't agree with me," said the tramp.

"I should remark not, young man. But I might as well tell you it would make you look better if you happened to fall into the hoss-pond down the lane."

"Naught so common. The Turkish bawth is me only in-dulgence of the kind."

"Well, I'll make you a present of a scrubbin' brush and a gallon of Tilda's best soft soap."

"Thanks, but I must decline."

"Well, Maggie! Maggie!" called Uncle Peter.

The Irish maid appeared at the farmhouse door.

"What is it, sur?" she said.

"Bring a couple of good thick slices of fresh bread, and put plenty of cold meat and butter between them."

"Yes, sur," answered Maggie, retiring at once to execute Uncle Peter's order.

Bread! What a decadence of my hopes. I thought, oh truant fancy, that he would say pie," murmured Happy Jack, sadly.

Then to Uncle Peter.

"Have you a coin that you would lend me?"

"Well, I swan! I don't know 'bout givin' money to such fellows as you are."

"'Tis but a dime I crave, the price of a dri—I mean a shave."

"Well, I'll risk ten cents on you, young man. Here it is."

"Thanks. With interest shall I repay," responded the tramp, and taking the coin he snapped it deftly into the air, caught it with the other hand as it came down, and then dropped it into some mysterious coffer among his rags.

"Now, see here. Do you ever stop to think, young man? Do you ever consider how you are throwin' away your life and everything the good God has given you?" said Uncle Peter, seriously.

"Well, since you put the question, I do sometimes. But it's too late; I'm a wreck, though a jolly one. Whisky was the snag that wrecked me as it has many and many a better man," replied the tramp.

Now there was an intonation of real feeling in his pleasant voice.

Uncle Peter thought he had touched the right chord.

He went on appealing to the young man's self-respect:

"It's not too late, my man. You are young yet, a long life ought to be yours, and you're as smart as they make them. You might be most anything, and win the respect of the world. Now shake yourself up. Gee Whittaker! give the old enemy a fall and turn over a new page in life, and make it clean and honest!"

"See here! What are you givin' me?" said Happy Jack.

"Good advice."

"Did you ever try to live on it?"

"Good!" exclaimed Uncle Peter, slapping his knee in approval.

"You're right. The world is chuck full of fellers ready ter ladle out advice, but to make it useful, it ought to be backed up with a leetle friendly help in time o' need."

"You have spoken a great truth there, my old friend."

"No doubt you sometimes think of your mother. Perhaps she is living somewhere, and even to-night she may be pray-ing for her wandering boy. Remember you owe it to your mother, my boy, not to disgrace her. Think how in your help-less infancy she watched beside you through the long hours of the night. Think what you owe her, and be a man. Do not bring the gray hairs of your mother down in sorrow to the grave."

"By my soul, old friend, I'll try it!" cried Happy Jack.

"Do you mean it?"

"I do, I do!"

"Where is your home?"

"In New York city."

"Will you promise me to go home once more, stay there, and do your best to be a man?"

"Yes."

"Then there's five dollars. That will a little more than pay your fare home, and you kin get a plate of baked beans in Boston."

"Thanks. Five—great—big—dollars! Why, old friend, it's a long time since I had so much money. But stay; I'm afraid to trust myself, I'll get on a spree in the next town. No, you had better take back your money, old friend," said Happy Jack in a voice of real emotion—bitter regret.

"Won't do it! What! don't you think the memory of your mother will prove stronger this time than the power of alcohol? Go, and Heaven help you!"

"Right! I will go, and by the sacred memory of the mother who bore me, I'll give old King Alcohol the tightest wrestle for the under fall he's had in many a day. Good-by! Maybe it will come my way to show my gratitude some day. Good-by, old friend—good-by!"

Happy Jack pressed the hand of the honest farmer, and Uncle Peter felt a suspicious moisture in his eyes; but his heart was light with the exultation of a good—a noble deed.

And so Happy Jack went away from the old New England homestead, and when presently Maggie came out with the lunch which Uncle Peter had ordered for him he was gone.

"Where's the gintleman?" asked Maggie.

"Gone. We both forgot that he was hungry, but never mind, Maggie, you may take the lunch back to the house," replied Uncle Peter.

Then Ab Stubbs, Aunt Tilda and Howard came out as the men from the harvest-field came in, singing in happy, tuneful voices, and while they were at table, waited on by Maggie, conversation was resumed without in the gloaming.

And as it grew later a merry company of young people—youths and maidens from the adjacent farms—arrived.

They were all Howard Weatherall's old and valued friends.

Many of the young guests had been the schoolmates of the farmer's son.

But there was only one among them all who had won a regard more tender than simple friendship from the young bank cashier who had left the farm to make his way in the world.

We have mentioned Ruth Everheart, and among all the pretty country maidens in New Hampshire she would have stood pre-eminent. Fair was Ruth, slender and graceful, with eyes of deepest blue framed in long, golden lashes.

And it did not require close observance to see that Howard was the sweet girl's favorite. In truth, although it was as yet a secret between them, they had already plighted their troth.

"Come, Ab, get down the fiddle and let's have a dance," suggested one of the guests who knew that old Ab Stubbs had fiddled for country dances for twenty years.

"Don't care if I do, to please all you young folks," assented Ab.

There was a fiddle in the house, the property of one of the harvest hands, and Ab was soon sawing away at "Money Musk," and calling the figures of a regular old-fashioned "barn door cotillion."

But all at once, when the festivities were at their height, Ab caught sight of his hated rival, Josiah Perkins, an old boy of seventy—a trifle older than himself—approaching, and seeing Nat Smudge as he came whistling from the barn with a hat full of eggs in his hand, he called out to the lad, who came to him somewhat distrustfully, and whispered:

"Nat, I'll give you a dollar and a half if you'll put them eggs where that durned Josiah Perkins will set on um and spile his new clothes."

Nat nodded an assent, and some moments later, while Howard was in the house, a horseman, riding rapidly, passed Josiah Perkins and drew rein at the gate.

"Sheriff Blake, from Clingville! How de do, sheriff? Come right in. Tickled to see ye!" said Uncle Peter, and he opened the gate.

The sheriff dismounted and entered the farmhouse yard.

"I've a painful duty to perform, Uncle Peter, and I don't know how to break it to you," he said.

"Speak out, man. We are honest folks here, and have nothing to fear," said Uncle Peter, with dignity.

"Well, the truth is, Uncle Peter, I've a warrant for the arrest of your son Howard."

As the sheriff spoke Howard came out of the farmhouse, and he heard his last words.

The young clerk halted suddenly, as though the words had been a blow that made him recoil.

"A warrant for my arrest! Surely there must be some mistake, Mr. Blake!" Howard cried.

"Yes, yes; it must be so," said Uncle Peter, eagerly, while his honest old face paled a trifle.

"No—I am very sorry for you all, but Howard is accused of robbing the Clingville Bank, and I must arrest him. Howard, you are my prisoner," said the sheriff, sternly, and as he spoke he advanced and placed his hand on the young cashier's shoulder.

The merry-makers were for the moment dumb with consternation.

Uncle Peter uttered a groan of mental agony, and he made a start as if to wrest Howard from the officer's hold.

"Howard a thief! No, no! It cannot be!" cried Ruth Everheart.

And she came toward Howard, but a sudden faintness seized her as the sheriff started to lead his prisoner away, and she would have fallen had not Uncle Peter caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER IV.

HOWARD TAKEN AWAY BY THE SHERIFF.

"Ruth! Oh, father! Aunt Tilda! She has fainted!" cried Howard, as Ruth fell into Uncle Peter's arms.

"Dash a leetle cold water in her face, Tilda," said Uncle Peter.

"Gin an' peppermint is the best thing, an' old Bill Jones 'ud say so if he was alive," remarked Ab Stubbs.

Aunt Tilda ran to the well, and Nat Smudge had begun to lower the bucket attached to the long, old-fashioned sweep.

But Ruth's faintness passed away almost as soon as it had come upon her.

A restorative was not required. A moment and poor Ruth was herself again, though still pale as a lily.

Howard had paused on his way to the gate, and the kind-hearted sheriff, who sincerely regretted that the duty of his office compelled him to remove Howard, waited for him to say a few words of farewell.

As the power of utterance returned to Ruth Everheart she cried, earnestly, as she sprang to her youthful lover's side:

"Say it is false! Oh, Howard, let all your friends hear you declare your innocence in the face of this shameful accusation."

Howard took both of Ruth's hands and pressed her to his heart for a moment, as he replied, drawing his fine form up to its full height with all the dignity of conscious innocence:

"I am guiltless. I did not think it necessary to assure my friends of that. I am sure there is not one among them all who thinks I had a hand in the robbery."

"No, no!"

Howard's friends thus voiced their conviction.

But there was one among them who muttered:

"Strange that the sheriff should have been sent here unless the authorities were sure of what they were doing."

The speaker was a tall young fellow, whose shock of red hair made him a prominent figure.

His name was Buckly Rodney, but he was always called "Buck" Rodney.

The young man's father was a wealthy miller, and it was generally known that he had sought to become Ruth Everheart's suitor unsuccessfully.

Buck Rodney's words implied something of a doubt of Howard's innocence.

Only two or three persons who were quite near him heard them, however. But the ill-timed remark reached the ears of Ab Stubbs.

"Course the boy is innercent, an' durn my buttons if I don't thrash any one as says he ain't clean outen their boots; I ain't so old as I look, come right down tu it, as old Billy Jones used to say!" cried honest, loyal-hearted old Ab.

Then the "old boy" spit on his hands and cut a pigeon wing.

But Aunt Tilda said:

"Don't be a fool, Abner! Du set down."

Then Abner subsided very meekly—for him—muttering:

"I'm a-goin' to stan' by Howard long as there's a button left on my trouserloons. Am, by gravy!"

"Howard, my boy, I believe you. It would nigh about break your old father's heart if he thought you were dishonest. But it is a shame to bring this disgrace upon you! I'm a law-abidin' citizen, sheriff, but I believe the boy speaks the whole truth, and, by Heaven, you shan't take him away to jail!" cried Uncle Peter, moved as only a father could be under similar circumstances.

"Peter, Peter!" said Aunt Tilda, deprecatingly.

But the noble old man's blood was up now. He felt that justice and right were on his side, and for a moment his excitement caused him to lose sight of the fact that he was defying the authority of the law.

As Uncle Peter spoke he seized the sheriff by the collar and hurled him away from Howard.

The officer uttered a word of resolute protest, but he kept his temper, and advanced again toward Howard, saying, sternly:

"You forget yourself, Mr. Weatherall. I must take the boy, and I shall do so."

"Stand back, sheriff! Don't lay a hand on my son. I warn you not to do it. If you do, I'll knock you down!"

Uncle Peter uttered the threat fiercely.

At the same time he seized a chair which stood beside him on the lawn, and, swinging it in the air, he brandished it over the sheriff's head threateningly.

Aunt Tilda uttered a little frightened scream.

But Ab Stubbs jumped up again, and threw off his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves, as he cried:

"That's right, Peter! Tell him I'm a-comin', tu! Ther Stubbs all fit into the revolutionary war, every durned one on 'em, an' ther fightin' stock ain't run out yet!"

"Hold, father!" cried Howard, stepping forward, while Ruth clung to his arm. "There must be no violence done here on any account. Sheriff, I will go with you peacefully."

Howard gently placed his hand upon his father's arm and lowered the chair.

Then he placed himself at the sheriff's side.

"Thank you, Howard. You have aided me in the performance of the most unpleasant duty that has fallen to me in many a year," said the sheriff.

"Good-by. Ruth; good-by, father, Aunt Tilda and all my friends. I'll come back to you fully exonerated—my innocence proven. Before all the world, I am sure I will," said Howard.

There was a tender scene of parting, and Nat Smudge, who had placed his hat filled with eggs in the arm-chair which he

knew was usually occupied by the "old boy," Josiah Perkins, who had stopped to chat for a moment at the toll-gate under the hill, blubbered out:

"It's a durn mean trick takin' Howard away! Boo! Hoo! I'd give the sleeve-buttons Aunt Tilda promised me if it 'ud do him any good! Boo hoo! hoo!"

"It's a good heart yez have if yez are a bit av a booby, sure," said Maggie O'Tool. "Faith, an' I never thought to see the loike in America. Shure, an' it's evictionin' Howard away from us the blackguard is afther doin'."

"That must be worse than just takin' him away. Boo! hoo! hoo!" bellowed Nat. But Maggie O'Tool shook him until he stopped blubbering, and began to whistle "Wait Till the Clouds Roll By."

Then the sheriff's assistant arrived with an extra horse, and a moment later Howard was riding away between the two officers.

"I'll always think you innocent, come what may," were Ruth Everheart's last words to Howard at parting.

"I'll hitch up the bay mare and drive right over to Clingville after you, Howard, an' find out all about the robbery at the bank. Don't be down-hearted, boy. If the Weatherall homestead will stand bail fer you we'll have you back hum in a few hours," said Uncle Peter.

"An' I'll go on your bail-bond, tu, Howard, fer all the Stubbs' place is worth. That's the kind of an old friend Ab Stubbs is, come right down to it," said Aunt Tilda's ancient beau.

The young folks who had assembled to welcome Howard home were profuse in their expressions of sympathy for Uncle Peter and Aunt Tilda.

But there was one among them who was silent, and we need hardly say that the one exception was "Buck" Rodney.

"Well, it must be the good Lord's will that this trial was to come to us, an' it's no use cryin' over spilt milk. I'll just put on a clean shirt and my go-to-meetin' clothes, while you, Nat, get the old mare hitched up to the buck-board, and I'll be off to Clingville," said Uncle Peter.

Nat hastened to the stable, while Uncle Peter entered the house.

The young folks said good-night, and took their way homeward.

All were depressed by the sad and surprising incident which had spoiled all the evening's enjoyment and so suddenly brought grief and anxiety where all had been cheerfulness and tranquility.

Buck Rodney did not appear to share the general sentiment of sorrow.

With a cheerful smile and a remark whose levity jarred upon Ruth's depressed spirits, Buck Rodney offered himself as an escort to see Ruth home.

Of course he was declined.

The auburn-haired youth turned away with a frown, and a hot flush of anger suffused his face, causing it to rival the lurid hue of his red hair.

He muttered some half inaudible words which sounded like a threat, and Ruth heard him mention the name of Howard with a sneer.

"Ah," thought Ruth, "his jealousy has made him Howard's enemy."

Ruth was quite right in this conclusion.

CHAPTER V.

ABNER AND JOSIAH.

Maggie O'Tool had gone into the kitchen, and now that the young people were all gone, Ab Stubbs and Aunt Tilda were left alone.

Aunt Tilda wiped the tears from her eyes with her spotless white apron, and sighed deeply as she sat down on a rustic chair under the apple tree.

"There's a good deal of trial and tribulation in this world, Abner," she said.

"A heap on it, Tilda, a heap on it. But I've allers took notice the sun shines the brightest after a storm, an' I guess everything 'ull clear up 'bout Howard," replied Ab.

Then he hitched a trifle nearer Aunt Tilda and took a look down the road.

He saw Josiah Perkins still standing at the toll-gate.

"Durn my buttons, I dunno but Josiah 'ull pop to-night. 'Taint's just the best time to do it, maybe, but 'procrastination's the thief o' time,' as old Bill Jones used to say, so here goes, sink or swim, by gravy!" said Ab to himself.

Then he fixed up his old-fashioned choker and twisted his legs one around the other like a pair of grapevines. Ab was about to speak when Aunt Tilda said:

"I declare, Abner, you are a good friend. You don't know how proud I was to see you stan' right up for poor Howard."

Ab felt encouraged. Evidently Aunt Tilda was in a favorable mood for hearing what he had come to say, though the courage seemed to ooze out of Ab as he tried to put his sentiments into words.

But he finally began:

"You see, Tilda, as I was sayin' a while ago, I—I thought that I'd make sure to ask you to-night if you'd—you'd——"

"What, Abner—what?" and Aunt Tilda leaned toward him with an encouraging smile.

"I thought I'd ask you if you'd—if you'd mend my Sunday vest."

"Missed fire again! Durn my buttons, I'll take another start!" added Ab, mentally.

But just then Uncle Peter came out of the house.

"Waal, Tilda, I'm all ready to go. Pray for our poor boy, Tilda, that I may bring him safely home again without a stain on the honest name you and I have borne with honor all our lives," said the old farmer in a voice of emotion.

"I will, Peter—I will," answered Aunt Tilda.

But Ab was all doubled up, and shaking with laughter.

"Why, land's sakes, Peter. What have you been an' put on your head?" exclaimed Tilda, and she, too, was forced to smile.

"Darn my buttons, if you ain't gone an' put on Tilda's hat, with the yaller ribbons an' danderline posies on it!" exclaimed Ab, laughing until his sides shook more than ever, and he was suddenly taken with a cramp of the muscles, when his laugh changed to a yell of pain, and he cried out as he danced around on one leg:

"Oh, Lordy! I've broke suthin' inside!"

"Waal, now, so I have made a mistake. Found your hat jist where I left my old pannamar, tu, Tilda. Better give Ab a dose of paregoric 'fore he gits any wuss."

"Oh, I'm all right now," said Ab.

"Here's the hoss ready, Uncle Peter!" called out Nat Smudge, who had just driven the old mare up to the gate, whistling away as usual the while.

"Maggie! Maggie!" called Aunt Tilda.

"Yes, missus," replied the jolly Irish girl, coming to the door.

"Bring Uncle Peter's straw hat, Maggie."

Uncle Peter had his own hat on his head a moment later, and he was soon driving away as fast as the old mare could travel.

The rattle of the old buckboard could be heard long after it was out of sight.

But just as Uncle Peter drove away Josiah Perkins arrived.

"Evenin', Tilda. Mighty cool an' pleasant, ain't it? This summer's suthin' like the summer you helped Squire Skin-

ner's folks durin' hayin', an' I used to walk home with you," said Josiah.

Aunt Tilda shook hands with the old fellow as he spoke.

"Yes. Those were happy days, Josiah.

"So they were, Tilda. So they were, and——"

"Ahem! Ahem!"

Ab Stubbs coughed loudly, and Josiah saw him standing in the shade of the apple tree.

Ab thought it was fully time to make his presence known. He did not like the sentimental tone of his rival.

"Hello, Ab Stubbs here! Waal, I swan!" said Josiah.

There were disgust and disappointment in his tone.

"Guess other folks has got a right tu call on neighbors as well as you have, Josiah Perkins," replied Ab in a sulky tone.

"Shew! Now dew be friendly. You're both welcome, I'm sure," said Aunt Tilda, deprecatingly.

"He! he! he! You needn't think you kin crow over other folks, if you have got store close on an' yer boots greased," grumbled Ab.

"Take a cheer," invited Aunt Tilda.

Ab chuckled as he saw Josiah go toward his favorite chair, which stood in the shadows of the tree where the moonlight failed to penetrate.

"You seem to feel mighty funny to-night 'bout suthin', Ab. Guess you must a been readin' the almanac, I swan," said Josiah.

He was as fat, proportionately, as Ab was thin. In fact, Josiah looked like a jolly old boy of eighty.

The next moment Josiah sat down and—squash! there was a sound of demolition in Nat Smudge's egg stock.

The shells cracked and their contents squirted all over Josiah's new clothes.

"I've sat on suthin', I swan!" cried Josiah, jumping up as suddenly as if he had come in contact with the persuasive tack. "Whew! eggs! Didn't 'spect tu find a hen's nest in the cheer."

"He! he! he!" roared Ab. "Better go hum an' git some one to clean yer clothes."

"I swan! my new suit is jist about spilt, too. Paid eight dollars un' a half fer 'em down to the corners."

"Haw! haw! haw!" bellowed Nat Smudge, who had been standing behind a tree waiting to see the fun.

"Nathaniel!" said Aunt Tilda, reprovingly, "Nathaniel, you must have left them eggs in the cheer. Of all careless, good for nuthin' boys you are the beatin's. You deserve a sound thrashin'."

"Whew hew! Whew hew!" Nat began to whistle.

"I'll tan his hide, I swan!" said Josiah, who began to get mad, as Ab continued to laugh at him, while he vainly strove to cleanse his new suit with his handkerchief.

"Boo! Hoo! I didn't go tu do it. Ab Stubbs told me to, so you'd spile your new clothes!" Nat blurted out as Josiah waddled toward him.

"Ab Stubbs, I am ashamed of you! I declare you are as much of a boy as you were forty years ago," said Aunt Tilda, but she laughed in spite of herself as Josiah began to chase Nat around the apple tree.

Josiah was so unwieldy that Nat had no difficulty in eluding him, and he made for the kitchen door.

"Whew! Some of them eggs must have been too old to be healthy!" cried Ab.

"Oh! worra! murther!" at that instant cried Maggie O'Tool.

There had been a collision between her and Nat. Both were overthrown, and before he could stop Josiah tumbled over them both.

Maggie had just come out of the kitchen door.

Nat scrambled up and was off, while Josiah extricated himself from an entanglement with foreign affairs.

And Ab and Aunt Tilda laughed the louder.

"By gravy! I hain't had so much fun since I was a two-year-old," cried Ab.

Now Josiah was mad. The mercury registered away up in his temper thermometer. It was hot weather with him in more senses than one.

"It's a durn mean trick! Yew think yer smart, Ab Stubbs. But I'll show you. Well, I swan!" cried Josiah, pulling off his coat.

"Want to fight! By gravy! Here, Tilda, hold my coat!" responded Ab.

He also divested himself of his coat, and held out the funny old swallow-tail garment to Aunt Tilda. But that maiden lady of uncertain age "respectfully declined" by letting the coat drop. If she didn't take the coat she took the man.

That was better—as all the boys will agree—she grabbed Ab and held him.

"Let me go, Tilda. Let me get at him! I won't leave enough of him for a gun-wad when I'm through with him!" cried Ab, but Aunt Tilda smiled as she noticed he did not try to get away very hard.

"Do let him go, Tilda! Do let him go!" urged Josiah.

"Mr. Stubbs! Mr. Stubbs!" piped a shrill voice at the gate at this critical juncture. "One of your new yoke of oxen is took sick, and Jerry says for you to come home right off."

"That's our hired boy. I'm sorry, but I must go, Tilda!" said Ab, and in a moment he was hurrying homeward.

CHAPTER VI.

HOWARD IN PRISON—THE WOUNDED STRANGER.

Meanwhile, Uncle Peter proceeded on his way to Clingville, and the old bay mare made better time than might have been expected.

The old farmer arrived at the town but a few moments behind the sheriff and Howard, and, having "put up" his horse at "the tavern," Uncle Peter hastened to the office of the justice of the peace, where Howard had been taken for a preliminary examination.

On his way to the office of the justice Uncle Peter overtook the president of the bank in which Howard had been employed as cashier.

"Ah, Uncle Peter, I am sorry for you. I suppose you are here to see about the robbery of which your son is accused," said the bank president, shaking hands with Howard's father, whom he had long known and respected.

"Yes, Mr. Haversham, I'm here to stand by my boy, and help to prove he's innocent. But tell me 'bout the robbery. How was it did? Why do you suspect Howard?"

"Well, you see, Uncle Peter, after Howard left the bank, a trifle earlier than usual, as he was a-going home, I had occasion to open the safe, in which, according to custom, he had locked up all the money. Then I discovered a package of money, which had been received by express that day, was missing. I knew that money had not been paid out, and no person connected with the bank had access to the money except Howard. The cashier's department is separated from the outer offices by an iron screen, and the door is kept locked by Howard according to my orders, and no person outside of Howard's department could have entered and taken the money without his knowledge. I should not have had Howard arrested without warning—for, despite the evidence I can scarcely bring myself to believe him guilty—but Mr. Powers, one of our largest stockholders, insisted that Howard must be arrested at once."

Uncle Peter listened with consuming interest to every word of the bank president's explanation, and then he replied:

"The boy never took the money. I can't tell how it may have happened, but jist as sure as eggs is eggs some one round your bank—some other one of the 'hands,' must have got hold of that missin' money."

Uncle Peter and the bank president walked on to the squire's office, where Howard and the sheriff had preceded them, and there was a throng of the townspeople present when they arrived there.

The news of the robbery had spread throughout the town, for the bank officials, somewhat indiscreetly, perhaps, had not attempted to keep it a secret.

The squire was examining Howard when his father came in, and after the facts pointing to the young man's guilt had been stated to him he was asked what he had to say.

Howard replied:

"No one can be more surprised than myself at this robbery. When I locked the safe I was not aware that any money was missing. I am accustomed to place a considerable sum of money on the counter beside the cashier's window, for convenience in paying it out. I remember that I placed the package of money received by express to-day on the counter when it arrived, and I think I placed it in the safe before I locked it; but it is possible I did not do so, and that in some way, which I confess I cannot explain, it was abstracted before I left the bank. Two strangers, whose appearance I did not like—as they certainly had the look of city sharpers—called at the bank just before I concluded the day's business. One of them had some questions to ask about foreign letters of credit, and the other bought a draft on New York for one hundred dollars. From the moment when I was first informed of the bank robbery I thought of those two strangers."

The young man's manner was frank and honest. He held up his head, looked the justice squarely in the face, and had the general appearance of conscious innocence.

But the crowd evidently thought his explanation very unsatisfactory. The newspapers almost daily recorded the exposure of dishonest bank cashiers, who had been regarded as above suspicion before their downfall, and the people were ready to think Howard's case was another instance of the betrayal of trust and confidence.

There was a murmur from the assembled throng which said as much, and Howard's face paled as he understood the manifestation.

Uncle Peter forced his way to Howard's side and pressed his hand, as he said to the justice:

"I'll go bail for my boy to the last cent I'm worth. Will you take bail, squire? Don't send the boy to the jail. You have a son yourself. Think of the disgrace."

"Under the circumstances I cannot admit Howard to bail. You will have to make application to the presiding judge of the district court in the regular way. Meanwhile I remand the prisoner to the custody of the sheriff," answered the justice.

Howard was led away to the jail, and Uncle Peter accompanied him, and was allowed to pass the night with him.

"I'm afraid Judge Benson will not admit you to bail, Howard. He and I are not members of the same political party. I done a heap o' lectioneerin' ag'in him down our way when he run fer judge, an' he don't bear me any friendship," said Uncle Peter, as he left the jail in the morning.

He saw the judge in company with an attorney whom he had engaged, but as he had foreseen, bail was refused.

Uncle Peter went back to the jail disconsolate and sad.

He saw no way in which he could prevent his son's remaining a prisoner until he was brought up before the court for trial.

The poor old man's face was pale and drawn, and he seemed to have aged in a few hours.

Howard's disgrace was the most bitter trial Uncle Peter had known since the lad's mother died.

While the events recorded were transpiring in Clingville other incidents having a direct bearing upon the fate of the unfortunate young farmer's son, were progressing elsewhere.

When Ab Stubbs so abruptly left the Weatherall homestead he was not long in reaching his own place. Ab owned a good farm, and a niece kept house for him. His hired man, who had sent the boy, met Ab at the door.

"By gravy! Run most all the way hum. Pesky nigh gin out, too. Bellow's action ain't so free as it was fifty year ago, as old Bill Jones used to say," said Ab.

"Come right out to the barn. Heard terrible groanin' and looked into the oxen stalls. One on 'em is down, and I reckon he's mighty bad off," said the farm-hand.

Ab followed him out to the barn.

They entered the stable where the oxen were.

Ab opened the door and went in first.

A deep groan emanated from the semi-gloom beyond, and as he heard it Ab recoiled. His hired man was only a half-witted fellow, and he said:

"That ox must be mighty sick to groan like that, Mr. Stubbs."

"You're a fool, Jerry! An ox never groaned nothin' like that. It's a human critter. That's wot it is, by gravy! Get a lantern, Jerry. We must find out wot this means."

"A man a groanin' in the stable. Yew don't say so, Mr. Stubbs?" replied Jerry.

Then he ran to the house and returned quickly, bringing a lantern with him.

Ab took it and entered the stable.

"Hello! Who are ye? Wot yer doin' here, an' what's up?" he cried.

A groan which Ab now located as emanating from a heap of straw at the back of the stable was the only answer.

"Curious, by gravy!" muttered Ab, and he advanced cautiously.

There had been some horse thieves in the neighborhood recently, and, thinking of them, Ab said to himself:

"Wish I'd brung the hoss pistol wot my great-grandfather nt with into the revolution 'long with me. Maybe this groanin' is only put on."

But as Ab took a few more forward steps, holding the lantern high so its light was reflected well in advance, he saw the form of a man who was crouching among the straw.

The light of Ab's lantern fell upon a pale, haggard face, stained with blood. The eyes were staring, the mouth open to give ready admission to the air for which the man panted.

Old Ab saw at one glance, too, that the stranger was well dressed, and that a murderous assault had been made upon him, or that he was the victim of an accident.

The kind-hearted old farmer thought only that the man was in need of help, and coming close to him, he said:

"How are you injured? Let me help you to the house. By gravy, why didn't you go there 'stead o' hidin' in the barn? Come, Jerry, lend a hand here."

"I've been shot. My pal done it. But he didn't git the money," groaned the stranger.

"Poor feller, some one tried to rob ye, eh?" said Ab, sympathetically, and as Jerry came to him they tried to lift the stranger between them. But he uttered frightful groans.

"No, no. Let me die here. I've got my death wound, but I want the world to know my murderer. Bring more witnesses."

"Jerry, go tell Parson Peters to come here at once. He's at the house. The parson allers makes headquarters with us when he's on this round of the circuit. He preaches at the red

school-house to-morrow," said Ab, addressing the last explanatory remarks to the stranger as Jerry ran out of the stable.

"It's all come of that 'ere robbery of the Clingville bank, my death has," said the wounded man, faintly.

"What?" exclaimed Ab, thrilled and excited.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN IN AB STUBBS' BARN.

The morning following the arrest of Howard, Ruth Everheart arose after a sleepless night with pale and heavy eyes. All night long troubled thoughts of Howard had haunted her, and the poor girl was suffering mental anxiety of the most trying character when she met the rest of the family at the breakfast table.

All save Ruth were as yet ignorant of the disgrace which had befallen their neighbor's son. But noticing his daughter's pallor and evident dejection, Mr. Everheart said:

"I think you didn't sleep well last night, my girl. You need cheering up a bit, too. Come, I am a-going to drive over to Clingville this morning, and you can ride along with me, and get that new gown you've been talking about."

"Thanks, father, I would like to go," said Ruth, with eagerness. She thought:

"I am so anxious to hear from Howard that I cannot rest. In town I shall find out all that is known of the robbery, and what has befallen Howard since he was arrested."

A little later Ruth and her father were on their way to the town behind one of the best teams in the county.

At an earlier hour another acquaintance of Howard's, prompted by a very different motive from that which actuated Ruth, was also on his way to the town.

Buck Rodney was the personage in question. He had arisen early and set out for the town impressed by a feverish impatience to learn whether or not Howard had really been imprisoned.

There was an expression of exultation on young Rodney's face when upon his arrival at the village he soon learned that Howard was the inmate of a prison cell, and that the judge had refused to admit him to bail.

"Nothing could suit me better. Now, indeed, there is no possibility of Ruth's father ever consenting to Howard's union with his daughter. 'A prison bird!' Ah, ha! a rare title for my proud friend!" muttered Rodney.

He was at the principal hotel in the town when from a window he saw Ruth and her father drive up.

"Ah, Ruth and her father! It cannot be that Ruth has induced her father to interest himself in Howard's case? No, no—the thought is folly," said Rodney, mentally.

Then he went out and met Mr. Everheart and his daughter at the door.

"This is a pleasure I did not expect," said Buck Rodney, pleasantly.

Mr. Everheart shook hands with his young neighbor, and Ruth accorded him a cool bow only. Then they entered the hotel, and went to the ladies' parlor.

"It's pretty hard on Uncle Peter Weatherall. His son Howard is refused bail, and the general conviction seems to be that he is guilty," said Buck to Mr. Everheart, taking it for granted he knew all about the robbery and the accusation of the young cashier.

Then, of course, it became necessary to enter into an explanation, and Buck Rodney did not fail to dwell upon the seeming completeness of the evidence against Howard.

Poor Ruth almost fainted as she heard that bail was refused Howard, and that he was consigned to prison.

Her father, with greatest solicitude, inquired the cause of Ruth's indisposition, but before she could reply he recollected that Howard had "aspired" to be his daughter's suitor.

"Can it be you have really formed a serious attachment for the young thief?" asked Mr. Everheart.

"He is innocent. He could not be guilty. Oh, father, try to save him!" said Ruth, imploringly.

Mr. Everheart made the transit of the room several times in an agitated way.

"What! render assistance to a thief? Never!" he exclaimed in his anger.

"Father, even the law does not condemn the accused unheard. You are most unjust," said Ruth, in tones instinct with earnestness and rebuke.

"He must be guilty," replied the father, with unabated vehemence.

Ruth, noble, true-hearted girl, started up in passionate denial and protest, but she suddenly became breathless in a listening attitude.

"What can that shouting mean?" exclaimed Mr. Everheart.

The echo of long, loud shouts uttered by many voices came to the ears of all in the room.

Buck Rodney sprang to the door.

"I'll find out what it means!" he cried.

Ruth knew not why it was, but she felt her heart beat fast, and a strange, nervous excitement thrilled her.

Buck Rodney re-entered the apartment in a moment or so.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Everheart.

"There's a crowd—a mob of men—on the street in the direction of the jail, Mr. Everheart."

Ruth felt cold all over, as a terrible fear caused her heart to cease its pulsations for an instant as Rodney spoke.

"What? You don't mean——" began Mr. Everheart.

"I fear," interrupted Rodney, "that they are a-going to mob our friend Howard. There's been a good deal of lawlessness of late in this county, and the people are pretty well enraged."

"But surely they would not attempt to attack the jail?" said Mr. Everheart.

"That's just what I fear the crowd is up to."

"Well, I am not in favor of mob law under any circumstances. Come, we will go and array ourselves on the side of law and order, Buck."

"It's little good we can do. The people are particularly bitter against Howard, for the loss of the money he stole forced the bank to suspend to-day."

"Indeed! Well, there are a great many poor people who have money deposited there. They think they will never get it now, I presume."

"Yes, and as Howard is looked upon as the cause of their ruin, you can imagine they will show him little mercy if they get him out of the jail."

Ruth tried to speak.

The agony of anxiety she endured rendered her dumb, however. The great fear that was upon her froze her into silence. Howard in the hands of a merciless mob! Oh, the thought was terrible.

And now the shouts of the excited people in the street were more distinctly heard.

Surely it seemed they were approaching.

There was an exultant ring in the medley of excited voices that struck upon Ruth's listening ears like a knell of doom.

She thought it was foretold that Howard had fallen into the hands of his enemies.

Again Buck Rodney went from the room as the sounds from the street became more distinct. Mr. Everheart, now a prey to unwonted excitement, followed the young man.

Ruth gained a window.

But it did not command a view of the front street whence came the tumult of the crowd.

Then, as her strength came back, Ruth passed hurriedly from the room. She could endure the suspense, the dread uncertainty no longer.

"I must know the worst. Oh, Heaven, protect Howard now!" murmured Ruth.

There was a hall beyond the door leading to the balcony in front. Ruth traversed it swiftly.

In a moment she was in view of the street upon the balcony of the second floor of the hotel.

A scene of excitement and confusion, new to the streets of the little town, which was characterized, usually, by its peacefulness and quietude, was revealed.

A multitude of people—men, women and children—were in the street, and in a dense, surging mass they were approaching the hotel.

Ruth's eyes swept over the throng with searchful glance, seeking for one whom she expected yet dreaded to behold there.

At first she could not discern Howard among the crowd.

But a second survey of the multitude was rewarded by the sight of the young cashier.

* * * * *

Ab Stubbs was electrified by the words of the wounded man when he said, in substance, that he attributed his fatal injury to the robbery of the Clingville Bank.

"Yes," reiterated the latter faintly as he heard the other's exclamation of astonishment, "I'm a-givin' it to you all straight."

"By gravy! Jew's-harp and gooseberry bushes! Who robbed the bank?" cried Ab.

Ab was thrilled with honest joy as the thought dawned upon his mind that possibly the wounded man could exonerate Howard.

Just then Jerry, and good Parson Peters, the Methodist circuit-rider, came into the stable.

"I robbed the Clingville Bank in company with a pal named Jedders—Jake Jedders. We came up from Boston to do the trick on some county bank, and spotted the Clingville 'money shop.' We got a big package of banknotes on the sneak racket, and so left, and gave up the idea of crackin' the safe at night. I carried the money, and I carry it yet. We quarreled in the woods back of the barn about the division of the money. Jedders wanted the lion's share, and finally I grabbed it all, and then we had a shooting match. We were both wounded at the same fire, and maybe Jedders is done for too for all I know. Anyhow he made off without trying to get the money further, and he wouldn't have done that if he hadn't been badly hurt, I'm sure," said the robber.

"You hear that, Parson Peters! By gravy, this here is good luck fer Howard Weatherall. It's jist mush and 'lasses, as old Bill Jones used to say," cried Ab in delight.

"Verily the sins of the wicked shall find them out," murmured the old parson.

"I've been a-thinkin' while I lay here and felt that I was on the way to my end that some innocent man might get into trouble about the money we stole. It was a slick trick, I tell you. You see, I'd been in the bank before we went in to work. So while Jake took the attention of the young cashier, askin' a lot of questions, I just reached a long wire with a hook onto it through the grating and pulled a big package of money off the counter over to the grating. Then I reached it with my hand, and was off with it while you could wink. I had just bought a draft, and lingered to work my game, and so the cashier didn't notice me," continued the bank robber.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LITTLE MISUNDERSTANDING—AB AND JOSIAH OFF FOR TOWN.

"Waal, you have done one good deed, anyhow, stranger. The young cashier of the bank, a first-rate boy, an' as honest as kin be, has been accused o' stealin' the money you took, and carried off to jail. It e'enmost broke his poor old father's heart, I tell ye," said Ab, after the robber spoke last.

"Well, you an' the parson can git the young feller off if you sing out what I've told you; and there's another thing will go further than all. I don't s'pose I'll need much spendin' money where I'm goin'. You'll find all the money I took from the bank in my boot-leg. May as well get it now."

The bank robber was too weak to do so, and Ab pulled off his boots, and found in them two large packages of banknotes.

"I belong in Boston, and if you'll send my body there—you'll find the address on this card—I'll be obliged to you, and an honest old father and mother will bless you for the deed. If I'd followed their advice I wouldn't be dying like a dog in a barn now," said the bank robber, bitterly, producing a card as he spoke.

"I'll do that much for you. And what hev I been thinkin' of? Here, Jerry! Saddle the black horse, and ride for Dr. Pildrive as quick as you kin," said Ab, and the hired man obeyed.

"Can I offer you the consolation of the church?" asked Parson Peters.

"Can't you offer me a sup of whisky, parson?"

"I can," replied Ab, and he ran to the house and back again with the "black bottle," which he kept in the cupboard, to "have handy in case of sickness," and was back in no time.

But the bank robber was past all earthly help long before the good doctor, who came posthaste, arrived.

Meanwhile Ab, to use his own expression, felt "like a colt in fly time."

The good-hearted old fellow couldn't wait to carry the good news to Tilda.

He gave the robber the bottle of whisky, and started on a run for the Weatherall homestead cross lots.

Meantime, Josiah had got rid of the impromptu "custard," and apropos of that he had vowed to get even with Ab "if it tuck all summer."

Aunt Tilda told Josiah all about the arrest of Howard, and the old boy sympathized with her heartily.

Josiah was in the midst of his condolences when Ab rushed into the yard.

Aunt Tilda and Josiah were seated on the porch. The night was so pleasant that they had not thought of going indoors as yet.

"Hurrah! fer hurrah!" yelled Ab, banging the gate behind him and making straight for Aunt Tilda and Josiah, forgetting that they had parted on the eve of battle.

Ab looked just as excited as he felt.

Josiah thought he had come back spoiling for a fight, and he jumped up and caught a bucket of water up from the bench on the porch.

"Don't you tech me, yeou Ab Stubbs, er I'll drownd yer!" cried Josiah, getting behind Aunt Tilda as far as he could.

"Take him 'cross yer knee and spank him, Tilda!" sneered Ab.

"It's all right, Tilda. He's a dead man!" Ab went on confusedly, meaning that the robber was fatally wounded.

"Murder! Now I lay me down to sleep! Aunt Tilda, call the dog! Don't you hear Ab Stubbs say I'm a dead man? He's a-going to shoot me!" yelled Josiah.

Ab thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Oh! Ah! He's got his hoss pistol!" cried Josiah, and then he hurled the bucket, water and all, at Ab, and ran for the gate.

Ab dodged the water and bucket, and pulled out the roll of banknotes the robber had given him, and flourished them exultantly as he called out to Josiah:

"Come back, you 'tarnal fool, I wan't talkin' 'bout you!"

"Well, my sakes! How yeou do take on, Ab Stubbs. I do believe you're clean gone crazy!" said Aunt Tilda.

"I guess he's drunk, Tilda. I'll bet the black bottle he keeps fer the rheumatiz is empty, too!" called out Josiah from the gate.

"No, I ain't drunk, nuther, nor crazy, either. It's about Howard. He's cleared, an' Ab Stubbs says so."

"Bow! wow! wow!" came the furious bark of Uncle Pete's big watchdog, and the animal bounded around the corner of the house.

"Git out, Rove! Git out!" yelled Aunt Tilda.

But Rove didn't git in the way she wished.

But Ab and Josiah both got—Josiah got over the fence and Ab got part way up the apple tree just as the dog also "got."

It was a good hold on the skirts of Ab's swallow-tail that the dog got, and he remained thus with sublime indifference to Ab's efforts to ascend beyond his reach and Aunt Tilda's excited commands.

The canine manifested a tenacity of purpose. But it was not appreciated. Aunt Tilda demonstrated this forcibly. A broom-stick was the main argument.

The dog was defeated, but retired in good order, carrying the spoils of battle in his teeth. Ab was minus the skirt of his coat, and also minus all the good nature which had permeated him when he came back to the Weatherall farmhouse.

"Maggie! Maggie! come and chain up the dog!" cried Aunt Tilda, when the intimate connection between the animal and Ab was severed.

"Sure an' some one cried 'Call the dog!' an' so I let him loose," said Maggie, appearing at the kitchen door.

"It's all that durned old fool, Josiah Perkins' fault, an' now my coat is sp'iled. By gravy, I'll lick him yit! Come in here, Josiah! I dare you inside the fence!" called out Ab, and the two old boys glared at each other from opposite sides of the picket fence.

"Once a man an' twice a child," said Maggie O'Tool, sagely, as she collared the belligerent canine and led him away.

But Aunt Tilda had caught Ab's words when he said he had come about Howard, and with eager hopefulness she asked:

"Ab, what is it about Howard? I'm enemost sure you hev found out suthin'. Dew tell us. An' land sakes! where did yeou get all that money?"

Ab still had the bundle of banknotes in his hand, and he was about to answer when Josiah stepped inside the gate.

"There, I'm inside now, Ab Stubbs. Josiah Perkins don't take a dare from no feller," said Josiah.

Ab made a start at him.

But Aunt Tilda interposed, saying:

"Now if there is any more nonsense I'll send you both home right off. The idea, two old codgers like you prancin' round like a couple of schoolboys."

"Well, Aunt Tilda, I've found the feller that stole the money from the bank, and he's confessed and given up the money."

"Want tu know!" cried Josiah.

But Aunt Tilda exclaimed with heartfelt earnestness "Praise the Lord!" and she went on:

"Ab Stubbs, you have brought me the best news I ever heard in my life. But it's true, Ab? You're not joking?"

"No, no, Tilda. Bless your dear heart, you don't s'pose I'd trifle with your feelings 'bout sich a thing? Howard's all right, sure."

"Good! I swan, Ab, you're all wool an' a yard wide, a ten acre lot chuck full o' stubble—shake!" cried Josiah.

He put out his hand.

"That's right, Josiah. Do be friends, Ab, for my sake," said Aunt Tilda.

"Course I will. I'm so happy I can't be mad at any one," said Ab, shaking hands with Josiah warmly. But as he dropped his hand he added:

"Josiah, how's eggs?"

Josiah didn't hear or didn't seem to, and Ab hastened to tell all about the finding of the wounded bank robber in the stable and his confession.

"Now, what's to be done, Tilda? I think I'll start fer Clingville to onct, wouldn't yeou?" he said in conclusion.

"Yes. Go at once, Abner! Oh, don't delay. Sakes alive, Peter will be tickled tew death, for this has been a sad trial for him as well as all who loved Howard," replied Aunt Tilda.

"I'll go with you, Ab. Will, I swan!" cried Josiah.

"Them as invites themselves ain't allers welcome, as old Bill Jones used to say," replied Ab.

"I'll pay the toll an' treat tu cider an' ginger-bread in town, Ab."

"All right, Josiah. Come along."

A few moments later, having gone to Ab's place, the two old boys were driving away for Clingville.

But there was a delay. The old Concord buggy in which Ab and Josiah rode broke down, and they had to turn aside and drag it two miles to a blacksmith. It was after one o'clock at night when they arrived there, only to find the smith absent. Clingville was eighteen miles away and no conveyance to be had, so the old boys concluded to wait until morning.

"Good news won't spile by keepin', as old Bill Jones used to say," remarked Ab.

"An' 'tain't likely we could git Howard released afore mornin', no way," replied Josiah.

CHAPTER IX.

HOWARD VINDICATED—THE FARMER'S SON GOES TO THE CITY.

When Ruth Everheart saw Howard at last among the excited crowd, as she stood on the balcony of the Clingville Hotel, the young cashier was being carried in triumph upon the shoulders of his enthusiastic townsmen.

"Three cheers for Howard Weatherall!" shouted one of the leaders of the crowd, and in him Ruth recognized the sheriff.

The cheers were given with a hearty good will, and as Ruth realized then that instead of being in the power of an enraged mob, as Buck Rodney had led her to suppose, Howard was surrounded by friends who were doing him honor, she experienced the greatest joy of her life. But for a moment the revulsion of her feelings was so strong that everything swam before her eyes, and when she saw clearly again she recognized Ab Stubbs, Uncle Peter and Josiah Perkins close beside Howard.

And then Howard caught sight of the slender, girlish form he knew so well gazing down upon him with a wealth of love and pride in her soulful eyes, and he waved his hand to her joyfully.

The procession reached the hotel, and Howard broke away from his friends and ran up the stairs three steps at a time, and joined Ruth, who was hastening to meet him, at the head of the flight.

And then, after the joy of their meeting enabled them to converse tranquilly, Howard said:

"I am cleared, the real robbers have been discovered, and the money stolen from the bank has been recovered."

Then, in reply to Ruth's eager questions, Howard explained that an hour or so earlier Ab Stubbs and Josiah Perkins had

arrived in town, and secured his release after restoring the stolen money to the bank, and relating the confession of the bank robber.

He added:

"The news spread like wildfire. There was a natural reaction of public opinion, and the people who were so ready to condemn me seemed bent upon making amends for their error. When I was released from the jail I found a crowd assembled in front of the building, and they insisted upon tendering me the ovation you have witnessed."

While Howard was speaking the voice of Mr. Everheart was heard calling to Ruth, and with a parting assurance of faith and constancy she ran to meet him.

Then Howard and Uncle Peter set out for home in the old buckboard, and they were closely followed by Ab and Josiah in the former's conveyance.

Aunt Tilda, Nat Smudge, Maggie O'Tool, and half a dozen neighbors stood at the gate of the old Weatherall farmhouse, waiting for Howard's return in glad expectancy.

The rattle of wheels was heard in the distance, and presently Uncle Peter and Howard came in sight in the old buckboard at the top of the hill.

Then what a shout of welcome greeted them!

Never was there such a home-coming, and when the old buckboard rattled up to the gate and Howard leaped out Aunt Tilda caught him in her motherly arms and kissed him, and cried over him as though he had been her own son.

But Aunt Tilda's tears were those of joy, and there wasn't a dry eye among those who witnessed the meeting, be it said to the credit of their honest, kindly hearts.

But for all that Howard had passed through the ordeal in triumph, there was a cloud on his brow, and he seemed troubled.

He and Uncle Peter had a long and earnest conversation that day when they were alone.

"I shouldn't like to go back to my place in the bank again, father, even if I am asked to do so, for I cannot forget how ready the directors were to consider me a thief and cause me disgrace," said Howard.

"Shaw! nonsense! You're tu thin-skinned, Howard. Nobody believes anything against you now, boy. Don't think of giving up your place in the bank," replied Uncle Peter.

"Yes, father, I must. I have felt a longing for a wider field—for an opportunity to seek my fortune where there are possibilities for the ambitious that our sleepy little country town does not offer. Now, I do not want to remain where any enemy can throw the taunt of having been arrested for theft in my face."

"No one would dare do that, boy," replied Uncle Peter, warmly.

"Not to my face. But you did not hear what I did in the village, father. Perhaps the remark was not intended for my ears, but that did not deprive it of its sting, and I was tempted to resent it."

"Why, what in the world did any one say? Du tell, Howard."

"Buck Rodney whispered to a comrade that it might be the bank robber was my accomplice, since the money was returned so promptly when I was arrested. I know now that jealousy has made that vindictive fellow my enemy, and he and his set of young men in the village will make it unpleasant. There will be a prejudice in the minds of some against me besides them, for a certain stigma attaches itself to him who has suffered my disgrace though he is proven innocent."

"I don't think you take the right view of the matter, Howard."

"I am sure, father, I would be happier away from Clingville

after what has happened if I could only see you and Aunt Tilda as often."

"Well, well, if you are bent upon going away I won't say nothin' agin it, boy. I know I can trust you anywhere."

"Thank you, father. Then I think I will go to New York. I can secure a situation in the great city, and work my way up, I think, though at first I may be obliged to take most anything that offers. I'm not afraid to work, anyhow."

And so it was finally settled that Howard should go to New York.

Aunt Tilda opposed Howard's resolution, having in her mind a vision of the temptations to which a youth like Howard would be exposed in a great city where he was entirely removed from the restraint of home influence.

But when the news came to the farmhouse, as come it did, that through the influence of a director of the bank a new cashier in the person of the director's nephew had been chosen in Howard's place, Aunt Tilda said no more against Howard's seeking his fortune in the city.

Thus it came about that Howard left the old homestead and went to New York city. But before he set out to enter upon a new career he and sweet Ruth Everheart renewed their vows of mutual constancy.

The weeks went by after Howard's departure uneventfully at the old New Hampshire homestead. For a time the absent boy wrote regularly to the old folks at home.

His letters were cheerful and full of hope and confidence. Howard wrote that he had secured a clerkship in a large wholesale house. But he confessed that he had found it by no means easy to secure even a slender foothold in the great city.

In truth, Howard had only succeeded in obtaining employment after a long struggle. He found out, as every young man must who leaves the farm and comes to the city, that there every industry is crowded, and particularly is there a superabundant supply of clerks, bookkeepers, and office-workers. Howard learned that a young man with a good trade was better off in the city than a clerk or bookkeeper, unless the latter has sufficient influence to secure his advancement.

Then, too, wages did not range as high as he had anticipated. Salaries were small, and competent men could be secured for semi-genteel occupations for a bare living compensation.

In the great city, while he observed upon every hand the evidence of vast wealth, the gaunt shadow of want, poverty and suffering stalked amid all the splendor, and Howard saw more misery than he had seen in all his life before.

The months went by and summer came again. Then for a weary, weary time no message from Howard came to Uncle Peter and Aunt Tilda.

But they went on praying for the absent boy, and waiting, waiting for the letter that did not come.

They could not think that Howard had forgotten them, and they were ready to find a multitude of excuses for his neglect.

One night in June Nat Smudge, who had been sent to the post office, returned in great glee with a letter.

"It's from New York, tu, I see by the postmark, and I'll bet it's from Howard!" cried Nat.

Uncle Peter joyfully took the letter from Nat, while Aunt Tilda came and looked over his shoulder, all eagerness as he wiped his spectacles and put them on.

But one glance at the direction through the glasses told Uncle Peter that the letter was not written by Howard.

Greatly disappointed he opened the letter and read it. Aunt Tilda also perused the missive at the same time over his shoulder, and then she exclaimed:

"Goodness gracious, Peter, they'll be here to-night."

CHAPTER X.

AN ARRIVAL FROM THE CITY.

"Who'll be here tu-night?" asked Nat Smudge, who had stood by whistling steadily while Uncle Peter and Aunt Tilda read the letter which they had just received from New York.

Don't be so inquisitive, Nat. It's some city folks comin' to see us, replied Uncle Peter.

"Yes, and you must fly around, Nat, and cut some oven wood and git the chores done early, and drive over tu the station and meet 'em with the buckboard. The gals can ride, but the young man will hev tu walk, I guess," said Aunt Tilda.

Maggie O'Tool was taking the wash off the clothes-line, and interested, of course, when she heard what had just been said.

"Sure, Aunt Tilda, an' if foine folks are comin' frum the city we'll have to bake biscuit for supper, for there's only a half a loaf of bread left, an' we wuz a-goin' to have mush an' milk for supper," said Maggie.

"Well, what's better than nice corn-meal mush an' good milk, thick with cream? I tell you, Tilda, they don't git much sich milk in York. Why, Abel Buckhead, up at the forks, what keeps boarders from the city in summer, says they dew beat all to drink milk. Saw Abe to-day. He's been an' white-washed his fences, and advertised everything fitted up fust-class. Wants me tew bring him up a load of old iron to dump in the mineral spring, what the city folks dotes on."

"Shaw, Peter, what does men folks know about gettin' a meal for city folks. Leave that to me. I'll get down Sarah Jane Shingle's cook book an' fix up somethin' out of that."

"All right, Tilda, I s'pose the young folks who are comin' to spend a few days at the farm are used to pretty good board tu hum, for they do say Henry Rupert has got tu be a rich merchant in New York."

"Little Hank Rupert we used to call him."

"Yes, when we went tu school with him down tu the corners. Now he writes me he's about to send his son Frank and his daughter Nellie and a young friend of theirs to see me and get a little good healthy air up here among the New Hampshire mountains."

"The letter says the friend of Henry Rupert's children that's comin' with them is a gal, so she and Henry's daughter can sleep together, and we'll give Master Frank Howard's room," said Aunt Tilda.

Just then the gate-latch clicked, and, turning quickly, Uncle Peter and Aunt Tilda saw Ruth Everheart looking as lovely as a fairy in her simple white muslin dress knotted with a flowing pink sash and her broad straw hat.

"Do come in, dear. It's been so long since you hev been over we almost began to think you had forgotten us," said Aunt Tilda.

Uncle Peter also welcomed Ruth heartily. She was beloved by every one at the old homestead, for her own sake and because of Howard.

"I cannot get away from home often since father has been sick," said Ruth.

"How is your father, Ruth?" asked Uncle Peter, kindly, although his wealthy neighbor had never been very friendly.

Mr. Everheart had been failing in health for several months, and he had finally taken to his bed a week or so previously.

"Well, father thinks he's some better, but the doctor doesn't hold out much encouragement," answered Ruth, and she added:

"I saw Nat hurrying by with a letter and I wondered if it wasn't from Howard."

There was a tell-tale blush upon Ruth's sweet face as Uncle Peter replied:

"True heart. You have not ceased to think of our absent boy. I am sorry I cannot tell you we have heard from Howard, for it is not so. The letter Nat brought is from some young folks who are comin' to see us"

Ruth sighed and looked disappointed, and Aunt Tilda drew her aside and asked:

"Have you not heard from Howard lately?"

"No, not for several weeks. You know I told you so at meeting last Sunday. Oh, Aunt Tilda, why don't he write? I am sure he cannot have forgotten us. Something must have happened to him. I am so troubled."

"Poor dear. It's cruel of Howard if he can write. But the dear boy will explain his silence yet."

"Talkin' about Howard, eh?" asked Uncle Peter, whose ears were ever quick to catch the name of his only and well-beloved son.

"Yes, Uncle Peter. Ruth has not heard from him in weeks, and you know they had corresponded reg'lar," replied Aunt Tilda.

"By gosh! It's a shame fur Howard tu neglect to write to Ruth, if it's his fault. I'm gettin' more an' more worried about the boy, an' if I don't hear frum him pretty soon I'll go down to York an' look him up."

"Oh, Uncle Peter, I wish you would. I dream sometimes that Howard is in trouble," said Ruth, eagerly.

"Well, well, don't fret, dear. Howard will return to you all safe some day if it's the good Lord's will."

"Do take off your hat, Ruth, and stay the evening. You look as pert and slick as a new red wagon. I tell you, gal, you're just like Howard's mother was when she was a gal," added Uncle Peter.

"Yes, Ruth, I feel a leetle narvous havin' to entertain the young folks from the city who are comin' this evening, and I do wish you would stay an' help me wait on table an' sich," urged Aunt Tilda.

"Oh, my, I'm not fixed for company, ax' city folks, too, Aunt Tilda."

"Bet there ain't none on 'em looks any better, for all the silk and satin they may put on. You must stay, Ruth, and meet two gals from the city."

"Oh, if they are only girls I'll stay to help, Aunt Tilda," assented Ruth.

Uncle Peter winked at Aunt Tilda knowingly, and she said nothing about the young gentleman who was expected also.

Then Aunt Tilda and Ruth entered the house, and Nat Smudge was heard whistling shrilly as he drove away to meet the city folks at the depot.

"Well, I guess I'll fill the cocoanut-shell with soft soap and draw up a fresh bucket of water, for the young folks will want to slick up a bit when they come," said Uncle Peter.

Then he heard voices from the road, and, glancing that way, he saw Ab Stubbs, Josiah Perkins and a fashionably-dressed and very handsome youth of about twenty approaching.

"Waal, by gosh, they must be a-comin' here. Wonder who the youngster is? Looks as though he'd stepped right out of a handbox. Does, by chowder," said Uncle Peter.

The trio whom he had sighted entered the yard as Uncle Peter went toward the gate.

"Howde do, Peter. We brung yeou a visitor. Jist chanced tu run foul of him on the road axin' for Peter Weatherall, so we tuck him in tow," said Ab.

"Howde do?" said Uncle Peter, cordially.

The young stranger advanced and shook hands with the old farmer, smiling pleasantly, as he said, in an off-hand, friendly way:

"I am glad to know you, Mr. Weatherall. I am Frank Rupert, the son of your old friend, Henry Rupert."

"Want tu know. Why, I jist sent my hired boy tu meet yeou with the buckboard. Where's the gals?" replied Uncle Peter.

"They are waiting at the depot. I was to return for them. You see, we arrived on an earlier train than we expected."

"Well, I'm right glad to see you. Come right in an' make yourself to hum. Abner and Josiah, you don't need no special invitation where you're allers welcome."

The young New Yorker and the others went into the yard, and Uncle Peter, bent on being very hospitable to his old friend's son, bustled about and dipped the tin wash-dish full of water from the bucket, got down the cocoanut-shell full of soft soap, and pointed out the towel and a comb-case on the wall of the porch, as he said:

"Now, make yourself right to hum and wash up just as soon as you like. Pesky dusty traveling, I'll allow."

"So it is, Mr. Weatherall," assented Frank Rupert. He was a stranger to farm life, and very much amused as well as interested.

"Just call me Uncle Peter. It sounds more home-like and natural like," said the old farmer.

Then while Frank washed up he asked him a host of questions about his father whom he called Hank, and the city boy laughed heartily at some of the reminiscences of his father's life as a country school boy, which Uncle Peter recounted with great gusto.

Meanwhile Ab and Josiah had seated themselves under the favorite apple tree. There was a checker-board in a chair, and a bag of white and black buttons for "men." Uncle Peter and Aunt Tilda sometimes spent an hour or so at playing the game. Now Ab and Josiah started to play.

Winter times they devoted a good deal of time to checkers, and each claimed to be the best player. They still quarreled as of old, and each was jealous of the other's attention to Tilda.

Presently Aunt Tilda and Ruth came out of the house, and both were surprised when they saw the company.

Ruth drew back shyly, but Uncle Peter introduced her and Aunt Tilda to Frank Rupert, and the latter said to himself:

"Ruth Everheart is the sweetest girl I ever saw."

CHAPTER XI.

AUNT TILDA MAKES A MISTAKE—AB AND JOSIAH AGAIN.

Perhaps Ruth was aware of the impression she had made upon the young New Yorker, for she blushed as she shook hands with him.

In the country district which was Uncle Peter's home an introduction was not considered complete unless there was hand-shaking.

Frank Rupert was really a noble young fellow, but Ruth did not think him nearly as handsome as the absent one who was ever in her thoughts.

But Frank set out to make himself agreeable, and he succeeded. Ruth soon felt as though she had known him for a long time, and at his request went to show him the flower garden.

Ruth did not forget that Frank was from New York, and in her innocence of the great city she caught at the idea that perhaps he had met Howard there.

So when the flower garden had been duly inspected, and Frank had expressed his admiration, Ruth remarked:

"Perhaps you know Uncle Peter's son Howard. He is in New York."

They had seated themselves in the grape arbor, which was close beside the strawberry bed, though the vines screened it from sight.

"No," replied Frank; "I was not aware that Uncle Peter had a son in New York."

"I am sorry you don't know him. Uncle Peter is very anxious about him, for he has not written home in a long time, and I hoped you could give us some news of Howard."

"Ah, I think some one else is quite as anxious about Howard as Uncle Peter," said Frank, with a laugh, as he noticed Ruth's anxious tone.

The young girl blushed, but she made no denial. Instead, she said frankly, after a moment's hesitation:

"You are quite right. Howard and I are old friends, and I wish I knew why he does not write."

"No chance for me here," thought Frank, with disappointment, for the artless beauty had completely enthralled his youthful fancy.

"Well, I'll promise to try to look Mr. Howard up for you as soon as I return to the city. Have you his address?" said Frank, aloud.

"Oh, yes. But I am afraid he isn't there now," replied Ruth, and she gave Howard's city address.

"Well, I'll write and let you know how I succeed in my search as soon as I get home," said Frank.

"Oh, thank you. I shall remember your kindness," replied Ruth, joyfully, and then they talked about other things, and meanwhile, Aunt Tilda came out to pick strawberries for tea, and, though Ruth and Frank did not see or hear her, she was very near the grape arbor when, as the young couple arose to return to the house, Ruth said earnestly:

"You are sure you mean all you say, and you will write to me as soon as you return home? You will not forget your promise?"

"No, no, and I shall always think of you," replied Frank, gallantly.

"You have made me quite happy," replied Ruth.

Then they went to the house, and did not see Aunt Tilda, who had overheard their last remarks, and entirely misconstrued their import.

"Can it be that Ruth is so fickle? Ah, poor child, she is fascinated by this dashing young feller from the city, and he has banished the memory of our dear Howard from her heart. But I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't heard her words," said Aunt Tilda, unconsciously voicing her thoughts.

"I'll write to Howard again. Poor boy, it will be best for him to have his disappointment kindly broken to him by one who loves him," she added.

Then she uttered a little scream as she heard some one cough close beside her. Turning she beheld Buck Rodney, who had approached silently over the thick turf beside the strawberry bed, and who had overheard her soliloquy.

"Excuse me for startling you, Aunt Tilda; I wouldn't have ventured to cross your garden, only the new Alderney heifer father brought home broke out of the pasture, and I thought to make a short cut, and head her off before she reached the crossroad," said Buck, and he hurried on without waiting for an answer, vaulted over the garden fence, and disappeared down the road. Aunt Tilda stood like a statue for a moment.

Then she said:

"I wonder, now, if he heard what I said? I do declare, he came up just like a snake. He would be mighty well pleased if Howard lost Ruth. I do hope he didn't hear what I said, for he might talk."

Buck Rodney was pleased. If he could not win Ruth he did not wish Howard to, and he did not despair of yet becoming Ruth's suitor, it seemed, for he muttered:

"Let her fancy the city feller if she will. He won't be here to trouble me long. I've managed well through the help of the clerk down to the postoffice. I've intercepted all Howard's letters to Ruth, as well as his last two letters to Uncle Peter. Now I'll write to Howard in a disguised hand, and tell him that Ruth is to be married to Frank Rupert, of New York. That

letter, coupled with what Aunt Tilda will write him, will settle the business."

That very night Buck Rodney carried his evil plan into execution.

As Ruth and Frank returned to the house Nat Smudge drove up, whistling cheerfully. There were two pretty and stylishly-dressed young ladies with him in the buckboard, and Frank introduced them to all as his sister Nellie and her friend, Lida Carroll.

For a moment Ruth felt somewhat abashed in the presence of those elegant young ladies, but they were sensible, good-natured girls, full of fun and bent on having a good time in the country, and they soon placed Ruth at ease, and before tea all three were on the very best of terms.

After tea Ab and Josiah began to play checkers again, while the others were seated about on the porch and on the lawn, conversing, and Uncle Peter amused the girls with stories of his own and Hank Rupert's boyish doings.

Presently Josiah missed one of his black buttons as he and Ab were setting the checker-board for a new game.

"Guess it must have dropped on the ground, Josiah," suggested Ab.

"Must have dropped somewhere, I swan," replied Josiah, and he got down on his hands and knees and began searching in the grass.

The buttons on Josiah's coat were just like those used for checkers, and, as his back was turned, Ab whipped out his jack-knife and opened it. Then, with a broad grin and a signal that meant "say nothing" to Aunt Tilda and Uncle Peter, who chanced to look that way, Ab deftly cut one of the buttons off of Josiah's coat-skirts.

"Hello, here's the lost button!" then cried Ab, pretending to pick it up.

Josiah got up, and Aunt Tilda and Uncle Peter laughed, as a moment later, happening to push the checker-board aside, he found the missing button.

"Where did you get that button, Ab Stubbs?" asked the old boy, sharply, looking perplexed, as two buttons seemed to have been found when only one was missing.

Then Uncle Peter laughed more than ever.

Ab had his pocket-knife in his hand yet, and as Josiah saw him try to hide it, he suspected the truth, and felt for the buttons on the back of his coat.

Then he was mad, and he gave the checker-board a kick that sent the buttons into Ab's face.

"You cut that button off my coat, Ab Stubbs, gol darn yeou," Josiah roared. "Yeou think yer smarter nor pepper sass, don't ye? If it wan't fer company I'd give yeou suthin' tu laugh for."

"Shaw! you never give nobody nothin'. I saw yeou git up an' go out of meetin' last Sunday just afore Deacon Swiftfoot passed around the plate," retorted Ab.

"Don't yeou say nothin' 'bout bein' mean. I saw the silver quarter you hev been droppin' into the contribution plate at meetin' all summer layin' on the mantel down to your house yesterday. It had a hole punched in it an' a piece of 'lastic tied tu it."

"Well, I ain't so mean that I walk backwards for fear of wearing my shoes out, like you do."

"'Tain't so, nuther. Lemme git a chip."

"Chip! You're a chip—a chip of the old block. Yer dad was just like yeou, an' he'd stand out in the rain tu git his clothes washed tu save payin' the washerwoman."

"Here's a chip!" cried Josiah, picking one up from the woodpile and placing it on his shoulder.

Then he danced about like a boy of ten instead of eighty, as he called out, defiantly.

"I dare you to knock the chip off my shoulder. You're scared to do it."

"Be I—be I? Jis' wait till I git outen my harness, will yer," retorted Ab. "I used tu be the boss of the schule down to the corners, an' old Bill Jones 'ud say so if he was alive."

Ab began to take off his coat.

"Abner, Abner! you forgit we've got company," mildly admonished Aunt Tilda.

"Yes," said Uncle Peter, arising from his chair. "Put on your coat, Ab, and you behave yourself, Josiah."

Grumbling, both the old boys obeyed, and just then Nat Smudge came in grinning from ear to ear, whispered to Ab and then went out again.

CHAPTER XII.

FUN AT THE FARM.

"There's some mischief brewin' between Nat and Abner, I'm sure," whispered Aunt Tilda to Uncle Peter.

"Want tu know?" replied Uncle Peter, carelessly, for he enjoyed fun as well as any one if it was not carried too far.

"Yes, that pesky boy Nat didn't whisper tu Abner so sly-like fer nothin'."

"And sich a grin as he had on his face. He was laughin' ahead o' time," replied Uncle Peter.

"Abner ought tu be ashamed of himself fer puttin' up Nat tu play tricks on Josiah."

"Well, I 'spose he had. But you know, fer all their nonsense an' quarrelin' they are at heart the best friends in the world."

"Yes, that's so, Peter."

"But it's all your fault, Tilda," said Uncle Peter, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"I jist like to know how yeou make that out, Peter Weatherall?"

"You ain't doin' your hull duty, as Parson Peters says, Tilda."

"Whatever are you drivin' at, Peter?"

"Why, you oughter up an' pop the question to one or the other of the old boys, and marry him off hand ter stop their everlastin' bickerin' 'count of jealousy 'bout yeou."

"Shaw, Peter. How foolish yeou do talk."

"Yeou needn't be discouraged yit, though, Tilda."

"I don't know what I've got tu be discouraged about."

"There'll be another leap year yit."

"Peter, I've a good mind tu box yeour ears."

"Oh! Oh! Murder! Boo! hoo! hoo!" the shrill voice of Nat Smudge rang out, and he came flying through the door-yard gate, his red flannel shirt looking particularly lurid in the full rays of the declining sun.

"Uncle Peter! The black bull broke out of the barnyard an' he's after me!" the boy added, as he banged the heavy gate shut behind him.

None too soon. Enraged at Nat's red shirt the ugly bull came plunging against the gate.

But the gate stopped him, and Josiah threw a stick of fire-wood at him, hitting him in the head and causing him to turn tail and trot away with an angry bellow.

The city girls uttered little affrighted cries and ran into the house.

"Oh, Uncle Peter! Why do you keep such savage animals? Is it a buffalo?" asked Nellie Rupert, coming out of the house again.

Everybody smiled aloud.

"My land's sake! That's a he cow, miss," exclaimed Ab.

Then there was some general conversation, and presently Aunt Tilda said to Ab:

"You promised to make me a bark comb-case to-night, Abner."

"So I did, Tilda," said Ab, and he went to the wood-pile and selected some strips of birch bark.

Then he seated himself on a three-legged stool which stood near the long free end of the old-fashioned well-sweep.

Ab gave all his attention for the time to the work of carving the comb-case, while the conversation became general.

No one noticed Josiah.

But that old boy was meditating a "drive" at Ab.

He noticed the relative positions of the three-legged stool and the well-sweep.

Then he smiled in anticipation.

Cautiously he crept behind Ab, and, lifting the end of the well-sweep, placed it carefully under Ab's stool.

Then he went and sat down on the porch and looked innocent.

He took a peep over the side of the well-curb, though, as he passed it, and saw that Nat Smudge had left the bucket attached to the other end of the sweep full of water standing on the shelf inside the curb.

The old boy now wished some one would go to draw water.

And some one did so.

Josiah had not been seated on the porch long when Maggie O'Tool came out of the house and went to the well.

She did not notice that the bucket was already filled, and dropped it into the well as usual.

The weight of the bucket carried the end of the sweep to which it hung down into the well with force, and up flew the other end under Ab's stool.

Ab flew up with it.

He was hurled head over heels, and the stool was thrown after him.

Everybody laughed as Ab went sprawling.

"Ha! he! he!" roared Josiah. "Lookin' fur another lost checker button, ain't ye?"

Ab got up red in the face, and glared about. Then he made for Josiah.

"'Twan't me. Maggie done it!" cried Josiah.

Ab turned on the Irish maid, who was shaking with laughter.

"Dade, Mr. Stubbs, the swape was under yer stool forninst I came to the well. Indade, indade it was," cried Maggie.

"Gol darn yeou, Josiah Perkins. I'll throw yeou in the well, by gravy!" said Ab.

"Yeou can't dew it."

"Yis I kin, too. I'll show you, I'll——"

"Good-evening, my Christian friends. It seems that I have arrived at a time of levity and relaxation of spirit," said the drawling, sing-song voice of good Parson Peters, as he came into the yard.

"Jist wait till the parson goes," said Ab, in an aside.

Then while the parson took a chair on the porch and began to talk about the next donation, Nat Smudge went around to the barn by the back way.

He had recovered from his fright.

The bull had returned to his quarters, and after fastening him in the barnyard, Nat entered the stable where the old mare and a raw-boned old farm horse, too old for much use, were standing.

Nat took a last year's chestnut burr down from a beam and looked at it with an approving grin and put it back again.

Josiah had told Abner that he was a-going to take old Dobin—the old farm horse—to his place to pasture, and that he would ride him home that night.

Ab considered that here was a chance for a joke on Josiah, so before Nat came and whispered to him, he had managed to say a few words to that animated whistler.

There was fun ahead at Josiah's expense. Nat and Ab thought.

This consideration consoled Ab after his upset by the well-sweep.

"Jist wait till Josiah starts fur home on old Dobin. Then see who'll do the laughin'," he said to himself.

Parson Peters branched off into a new channel of conversation when he had exhausted the donation subject.

He then mentioned that his salary was not paid.

Josiah lost interest about that time, and hitched about as though the chair didn't fit him.

Josiah was a delinquent subscriber to the parson's salary fund.

He felt that he wanted to go home now.

The conversation seemed a little personal, and in his heart Josiah was singing, "I cannot tarry, cannot tarry."

It was part of a hymn.

"Waal, Peter, I've got my chores tu du when I git home, an' so ef you'll have Nat bring old Dobin round, I'll ride him home now," said Josiah, finally.

"What's yeour hurry, Josiah?" said Aunt Tilda.

"Yes, might as well stay the evenin'," added Uncle Peter.

But Josiah insisted that he must go, and so Maggie O'Tool was sent to the barn to tell Nat to bring old Dobin around, bridled and saddled.

"Much of a rider, Josiah? Don't recollect of seein' yeou a horseback since two years ago last 'tater-diggin', when Sue Squirms' twins had the measles, an' you rid fer Dr. Pilldrive," said Ab.

"Ride? Waal, I'd like tu see the hoss thet could throw me. Tuck the prize for ridin' at the county fair onct," replied Josiah, boastingly.

"Guess that's so, Josiah. Think I heard old Bill Jones tell about it when he was alive," assented Ab.

"Here's the hoss!" called out Nat Smudge presently, as he led old Dobin up to the gate.

"Well, good-evenin' all. Good-evenin', Tilda," said Josiah, and then he went out and mounted old Dobin.

But the next moment he uttered a yell.

Old Dobin gave a jump straight up into the air and came down with Josiah holding on to him with both hands around his neck and the skirts of his coat streaming in the air.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Uncle Peter; "what can be the matter of the old horse?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OLD FARMER'S VISION.

"Land's sakes, Peter, old Dobin must have gone crazy, and he'll kill Josiah, I'm afraid!" cried Aunt Tilda as the old horse bounded into the air again.

"Stop him! Somebody grab on tu the bits!" yelled Josiah.

Then up he bounded, and came very near going over old Dobin's head again.

Ab Stubbs roared.

The laughter was gall and wormwood to Josiah, and he cried:

"Here, Ab Stubbs! I know he's been an' done suthin' to the hoss, an' I'll hev him 'rested fer false pretenses, I swan!"

"Better make it breach o' promise tu ride any kind o' hoss, an' arrest yerself!" retorted Ab.

"I knew yeou and Nat Smudge was up to suthin' or other, Ab Stubbs. S'pose Josiah should be killed now?" said Aunt Tilda, reprovingly.

"Whoa—whoa!" yelled Josiah, tugging at the bridle rein.

He was a funny sight all doubled up around the neck of the raw-boned, bucking, old horse, and the young folks and Uncle Peter couldn't help laughing.

Uncle Peter ran to the gate, meaning to hold the horse, and give Josiah a chance to dismount.

Parson Peters followed him.

"How little is the power of man arter all when opposed to a hoss—tu that of the poor beast of burden even—when he knoweth his strength," he said, solemnly.

Uncle Peter opened the gate, and went toward the old horse.

But he did not seem to inspire old Dobin with much confidence.

With a snort the old horse threw back his ears and bolted.

He ran like a colt, and Uncle Peter stood gazing after him in astonishment.

Josiah clung to old Dobin's neck for dear life, but in a moment or so no one at the farm-house could see him for the dust he left behind him.

"Waal, it du beat my time, come right down tu it," said Uncle Peter.

"Gosh! Offered to sell old Dobin fer twenty dollars. Now I wouldn't take a hundred fer him," he added.

"Haw, haw! You kin keep up old Dobin's speed as long as yeou keep a chestnut burr under his tail," said Ab.

"Durn yeour buttons, Ab! The old horse 'll run hisself tu death, I'm afeard," said Uncle Peter.

"Then I'll stan' the damage, by gravy. Hain't laughed so much since old Bill Jones died," replied Ab.

"Peradventure, Brother Stubbs, Brother Perkins may be hurt," said Parson Peters, in a tone of reproof.

"Oh, no, parson. Josiah really can ride any four-legged critter he ever seed. He'll get old Dobin home all right," replied Ab.

So it turned out, as they heard next day.

A few moments after Josiah rode away so swiftly, Nat Smudge came limping into the yard whistling ruefully.

He had sat down on the barnyard gate and laughed so heartily at Josiah, that he lost his balance and fell off.

"Ough! ough! I've barked my shin, Aunt Tilda!" whined Nat.

"Sarved yeou right! It's a judgment on to yeou," said Aunt Tilda.

"Well, I want the liniment bottle," replied Nat, and he went grumbling into the house.

* * * * *

Frank Rupert and the two young ladies from the city remained at the old homestead for a week, and enjoyed themselves very much.

They roamed about the farm, gathered wildflowers in the woods, fished in the trout stream, and had a grand good time generally.

But they could only remain a week, and finally the evening of the day before their departure for home arrived.

Ruth Everheart and the young city girls had become much attached to each other, and Ruth had come over to Uncle Peter's to spend the last evening of her new friends' visit with them.

"It will be very lonely when all you young folks go away. I tell ye we shall miss yeour happy, smiling faces. Eh, Tilda?" said Uncle Peter.

"Indeed we shall. And we shall more than ever worry 'bout Howard," said Aunt Tilda.

"You know all about Howard, an' you see he hasn't written yet, for you know Nat has gone over to the post office every night, an' always come back empty-handed," said Peter.

He had told his young guests the story of the bank robbery, and all about Howard, not knowing that Ruth had spoken to Frank Rupert about his absent son.

The young girls from New York sympathized with the lonely old people in their trouble most sincerely.

They, too, could not understand why Howard did not write to them, well knowing, as he must have done, that his silence would make them anxious and sorrowful.

Howard's picture hung over the mantel, and as Uncle Peter's guests looked at the noble, honest face of the farmer's son they were loath to think any evil of him.

Sweet Ruth Everheart and the two girls from the city had exchanged confidences as young girls will when they become attached to each other.

Nellie and Lida knew now that Ruth and Howard were secretly betrothed, and they were deeply interested in the little romance of the country maiden's life.

And Lida had confided to Ruth the secret that since they came to the farm she had promised to become Frank Rupert's bride some day.

Frank and Lida had been lovers for a long time, and Ruth's beauty had only caused Frank to waver in his allegiance to Lida for the moment.

But Ruth had a new source of trouble, she fancied that Aunt Tilda no longer treated her as of old—that there was a certain coldness in the good old lady's manner, for which she could not account.

Ruth had made up her mind to ask Aunt Tilda that very night what was the cause of the change.

As the evening advanced the three girls were chatting away by themselves as they walked with arms encircling one another's waists up and down the lawn and passed a window where Aunt Tilda sat in the gloaming thinking of Howard.

As the three young creatures passed Aunt Tilda, whom they did not see, as there was no light in the room, Lida said:

"Now you must not forget and send me an invitation when you and Howard are married, and I'll invite you to Frank's and my own wedding."

Aunt Tilda started.

Then as the good old lady listened, trembling and hoping against hope, Ruth replied:

"I'll not forget. You shall be one of my bridesmaids if Howard and I are married, and if we are not my heart will be broken."

Then Aunt Tilda started up, and there were tears of gladness in her eyes. But she knew she had wronged Ruth by her cruel doubts of her fidelity to Howard.

Ruth was not a little surprised when she came into the house alone in search of Aunt Tilda, presently to be suddenly taken to that good lady's heart and kissed and cried over in the most affectionate and motherly way.

Then Aunt Tilda said:

"Forgive me, Ruth, I thought you didn't love poor Howard any more."

Ruth answered with an expression of the greatest astonishment, and then Aunt Tilda explained how she had overheard the conversation between Ruth and Frank Rupert in the grape arbor.

"Oh, I see how you were deceived," replied Ruth, and then she in turn made an explanation, and everything was understood between them.

"But worse than all, how can you forgive me, Ruth? I wrote to Howard and told him you were false. Oh, I hope he may not have received the letter," said Aunt Tilda.

Ruth was frightened, sorrowful, and doubly anxious when she heard this. Bitter tears fell upon Aunt Tilda's motherly bosom as she pressed the poor girl to her heart, and Ruth murmured:

"Howard would not believe it if the news came from any one else but from you. Oh, Aunt Tilda, it may be you have unwittingly driven Howard from me forever."

* * * * *

It was later yet.

Aunt Tilda and the young girls and Frank Rupert were in the "sitting room."

Seated in his arm-chair Uncle Peter remained without under the radiant moonlight, enjoying the cool, delightful evening, which was grateful and refreshing after the heat of the summer's day.

Alone, lulled by the hum of voices and the gentle music of the sighing night breeze, Uncle Peter fell asleep, and then in his dream he saw a vision, as real and plain as though it was reality.

While the sweet voices of the young girls in the house came softly floating to the poor old man's ears as in a dream, while they sang, he saw the vision.

A gilded saloon—one of those rum shops with which the great city abounds whose doors stand open to lure the youth to ruin, and at the bar drinking of the poison, which ruins body and soul, stood Howard.

The vision faded as the sweet singers' voices swelled the chorus of the beautiful song:

"Oh, where is my boy to-night?

My heart o'erflows, for I love him he knows,

Oh, where is my boy to-night?"

CHAPTER XIV.

UNCLE PETER STARTS FOR NEW YORK—HOWARD'S EXPERIENCE IN THE CITY.

Uncle Peter awoke as the voices of the singers died away.

It seemed to him that the vision of his dream was a sad reality.

The poor old man believed that the picture had been brought before his mental sight as a warning, and that he must heed it.

"Poor boy! Can it be he has got into bad company away off in that big city, and took to drinkin'? It may be so. Suthin' may have sort o' led him into the wrong course. Well, well, I won't wait no longer. I'll go down to New York, and find Howard and bring him back hum with me. I won't be too hard on the boy. Time was when I was a leetle too fond of hard cider myself; perhaps Howard has inherited the appetite."

Thus mused Uncle Peter.

He felt relieved somehow after he had made up his mind to go in search of Howard.

"Well, young folks and Aunt Tilda," said Uncle Peter, walking into the sitting room. "I've got a surprise fer yeou all."

"Want tu know?" asked Aunt Tilda.

"Oh, what is it?" cried Nellie Rupert.

"Well, you know your father has often written and asked me to come to New York and make him a visit, an' I've just made up my mind to go."

"That's splendid. Father will be delighted. You'll go home with us to-morrow, and Aunt Tilda, too," said Nellie.

"No, we can't both leave," said Aunt Tilda.

"Yes, I'll go home with you to-morrow. I shall be glad to see 'Hank,' your father—mighty glad, I tell you, for we were like brothers years ago. But I can't rest easy any longer until I find out why Howard don't let us hear from him. I'm a-going to look the boy up and bring him home with me, if he'll come."

"Bless your heart, Peter," said Aunt Tilda.

"Oh, I am so happy! You must bring Howard home to us, Uncle Peter," said Ruth, eagerly.

"I shall help Uncle Peter should he have any trouble in finding his son," said Frank.

"That's wot I was thinkin' on. It's a mighty big place down tu York, an' I recollect hearin' a man might git turned around some if he was a stranger."

"Yes. It would be an easy matter to get lost in New York city. But we'll look out for you."

"Well, Tilda, if you'll lay out my clean shirts and socks, I'll pack up my trunk to-night, for the train starts early in the mornin'."

"Yes, Peter, but what made you so suddenly decide to go to New York?" asked Aunt Tilda.

"I won't tell her 'bout the dream. I know it would make her feel bad, an' I don't want to do that," thought kind, considerate Uncle Peter.

Then he answered:

"I guess it was that hymn you young folks sang 'bout where is my boy to-night? I tell you it sot me to thinkin', Tilda."

The old farmer's trunk was packed that night, and he took the train for New York in company with the young people from the city.

Uncle Peter had never traveled much, as may be supposed, and he was as pleased and interested in all he saw as a boy would have been.

But now, leaving Uncle Peter and his young friends en route for the great city, we will precede them there and follow the fortunes of Howard, the farmer's son.

We have stated that Howard obtained a situation in a large wholesale house as a clerk.

For a time all went well.

Howard was diligent and faithful in the discharge of his duties, and he was fast winning the commendations of all with whom business brought him in contact.

But he found his lonely room in a cheap boarding house very unlike his old home, and, naturally fond of society, he soon began to frequent the society of a set of fast young clerks whose acquaintance he had made.

Howard had always been very temperate at home, and he had been taught to shun the barroom as he would a thing of evil.

But the set of fast young men who were his only acquaintances in the city frequented such places, and almost before he was aware of it he drifted into the vortex.

At first Howard drank only temperance drinks, but finally he began to take something stronger.

Then the habit grew upon him, and before he realized that it was really so he began to love the taste of drink.

The appetite became stronger with indulgence, as is ever the case, and soon the formerly temperate young clerk gradually became one of the wildest of his set.

Still he told himself that he was "only taking a social drink now and then," and that he could leave it off at any time.

But this was a fallacy.

It was the old story with the young clerk; he had entered upon a course which was sure in the end to lead to his ruin and downfall.

And there was one young man among Howard's boon companions who was really his evil genius. He was called Ned Black, and while he could make himself a very genial companion, he was at heart treacherous, jealous and intriguing.

When Howard secured his clerkship Black had been planning to secure the situation for a relative of his, and he was secretly hoping for Howard's downfall, wishing to get his place for his friend.

As the time went by, though he was very wild outside of business hours, Howard still discharged his labor as a clerk faithfully, and several months later he was promoted over Black.

This good fortune of Howard's increased Black's secret hatred, and he bided his time to injure Howard with the firm when the opportunity came, and come it did.

It chanced that one day a young merchant from Clingville came to the city to buy goods, and he visited the establishment where Howard was employed.

The young merchant was a newcomer at Clingville when Howard was arrested for the robbery of the bank there, and he knew nothing of Howard's excellent character or of his family, but he was acquainted with Buck Rodney, and certain remarks that young man had made concerning Howard had given the merchant a false idea of the young cashier's character, notwithstanding that he had been triumphantly exonerated from the charge of robbery.

Seeing Howard in the store, the young country merchant thoughtlessly expressed his surprise to the proprietors.

His remark led to an explanation, and the merchant told the story of Howard's arrest and discharge.

Howard's situation now required that considerable money should at times pass through his hands, and as Black had not failed to have a rumor of the fast habits of which Howard had become the victim reach the ears of the heads of the firm, those gentlemen, as a matter of self-protection, determined not to longer retain Howard in their employ.

That night Howard was discharged.

The beginning of the young clerk's downfall was at hand then, and that same evening, led on by Black, who seemed to sympathize with him, Howard became deeply intoxicated.

At first he drank to drown his chagrin, grief and disappointment. But he soon became reckless as the fiery poison mounted to his brain, and then he drank without stint.

At midnight he reeled homeward, and on his way he came face to face with another man from Clingville, and despite his condition, Howard recognized his townsman, and the recognition was mutual.

Next day, full of remorse, utterly miserable and discouraged, Howard went about among the hotels, seeking for the man whom he had met, intending to beg of him not to tell the old folks at home of his downfall.

Finally Howard discovered where his townsman had stopped, but he was too late to see him. The clerk assured him the man he sought had returned home.

CHAPTER XV.

HOWARD DRIVEN TO DESPAIR.

When Howard found that the gentleman from Clingville who had seen him intoxicated on the street had returned home, he felt more miserable than ever.

He thought the gentleman would be sure to mention the circumstance to his father, and he pictured to himself the sorrow of the old folks at home when they heard of his downfall again and again.

Up to this time Howard had not failed to write home regularly, and he had never missed writing to Ruth at least once a week.

Letters from home and from his betrothed had reached him promptly in reply to his own communications, and he was cheered and encouraged by those loving messages.

Howard returned to his room and sat down and thought seriously, while he looked the situation which confronted him fairly in the face.

Remorse filled his heart. He looked back over the past since he had come to the city, and vain and bitter regrets came to his mind.

Howard saw all the folly of his course as he had not seen it heretofore, and he said to himself:

"How weak, how foolish I have been to yield to temptation as I have done. I can blame only myself, and now too late I awaken to my folly. But I will reform, I will not continue in this downward course. Ruth shall not have reason to regret that she has given me her love, and father and Aunt Tilda

shall not have their declining years filled with grief and disappointment on my account. Yes, I am resolved to turn over a new leaf, and this very day I will write to father, explain everything, confess my fault and assure him of my new resolution."

Howard felt better after he had formed this resolution, and he at once wrote a long and affectionate letter to Uncle Peter, and also one to Ruth.

The next day Howard set about looking for a new situation. Again he endured all the weary trial of a search for work in the great city.

He felt that under the circumstances it would be useless for him to apply to his last employers for letters of recommendation, and he did not do so.

As may be inferred from his course of life, he had squandered his salary as fast as he received it, and now he found himself almost penniless.

The busy season of spring trade was over, and the summer was the worst possible time for him to obtain a situation.

The days went by and he failed to secure a clerkship of any kind, although he was willing to accept anything that promised a living salary.

Then, too, a great anxiety oppressed him, for since meeting with the gentleman from Clingville he had received no letter either from home or from Ruth, and yet he had written both repeatedly.

Howard imagined, then, that having heard of his downfall, the old folks at home and Ruth had, in just indignation and sorrow, cast him off, for no other reason for their strange silence suggested itself.

The young clerk's cup of misery was indeed full to overflowing then, and he lost heart and sometimes a feeling of utter recklessness took possession of him.

Howard no longer felt that there was a bond that held him with a loving hold to what was good and virtuous, and he felt himself drifting away again into the fatal quicksand. It sustains a young man and makes him better to know that loving hearts are watching his career, and that more than his own life is involved in his future.

The thought that Ruth had cast him off made Howard desperate, but he tried to think it could not be, that there was some other explanation for her silence.

Howard no longer sought the society of his former boon companions, and when he chanced to meet any of them they coolly passed him by.

The young man thought they had heard that he had once been arrested for robbery, and therefore shunned him.

It was at this time that Buck Rodney, aided by the rascally post office clerk at Howard's home, began to intercept his letters to Ruth. Nor did Rodney confine his rascality to that. All of Ruth's letters to Howard, as well as those written by Uncle Peter and Aunt Tilda, were stopped.

As the reader knows, the gentleman who had seen Howard in New York while intoxicated had not told Uncle Peter. Indeed, he had not mentioned the circumstance to any one. He was a charitable, conscientious man, and he made it a rule to speak well of every one or remain silent.

At last, through his failure to obtain work, Howard was obliged to pawn his gold watch, which he highly prized, since it was a gift from Uncle Peter.

It was the darkest hour that Howard had yet known in the great city. Very soon after that, he found a letter waiting for him one night when he returned to his room after walking about the city all day in quest of work.

At a glance Howard recognized the home postmark on the envelope, but not the handwriting, and he curiously opened the letter and read it.

The message was the lying letter which we know Buck

Rodney had resolved to write to Howard. It told that Ruth was soon to be married to Frank Rupert of New York.

A groan burst from Howard's lips as he read the letter of his enemy, and he sank into a chair, crushing the false note in his hand fiercely.

But he sprang to his feet again, and unfolded the crumpled paper, and read the signature "A friend."

"An anonymous letter, eh? I will not believe it! No, no, Ruth has not so soon found a new love! It is false, and its cowardly author feared to sign his name!" cried Howard.

But the name Frank Rupert fixed itself in his memory, and he felt that he should hate the man who won Ruth from him if there was truth in the letter, with an unreasoning, implacable hatred, which he had not thought himself capable of before.

The succeeding day came the final blow that drove Howard to complete despair.

Then he received the letter informing him that Ruth was false, which the good lady had written when she supposed such was the truth, after overhearing the conversation between Ruth and Frank in the grape arbor which she had so completely misconstrued.

Buck Rodney had of course permitted this letter to reach poor Howard.

The young clerk could not doubt Aunt Tilda—she who had been to him a foster mother—and when he had read her letter he fled from his room like one demented.

For hours he walked the streets dazed, crushed by the cruel blow a friendly hand had unwittingly dealt him, knowing not, caring not whither his unguided footsteps led him.

Howard was in a dangerous mood—a mood in which men commit deeds of recklessness which under other circumstances they would consider impossible for them.

Since he had formed his good resolution to begin a new life Howard had not drunk one drop of any intoxicating drink, nor had he darkened the door of a rum shop.

But now he felt that he had nothing to live for. His disappointment was the culmination of all his misfortunes. He lost sight of the fact that in her letter Aunt Tilda had assured him of her own and Uncle Peter's love and solicitude for his welfare and that she stated that they had received no communication from him for weeks.

A mad desire to forget everything—to bury himself in oblivion, came upon him, and he rushed into the nearest saloon bent upon drowning his sorrow in drink.

His pale face, drawn with the lines of mental suffering, stared at him from the mirror over the bar as he drained a swimming glass of raw liquor, and he laughed a hollow, mirthless laugh, which sounded like a mockery as he saw the apparition of himself.

And Howard drank and drank again until the alcohol mounted to his brain, and he forgot everything save an insatiable thirst for more of the fiery poison.

Then he reeled homeward, and reaching his room, flung himself upon the bed and sank into a heavy, drunken sleep.

It was that night that Uncle Peter saw the vision of his absent boy in the gilded rum shop and determined to seek to save him.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNCLE PETER ARRIVES IN NEW YORK.

After this Howard sank lower. He was finally driven by want to seek employment as a laborer. Then he went to lodge in one of those miserable cheap lodging houses where the poverty-stricken alone seek shelter.

The days went by slowly to Howard, and he was in an apathetic state, and careless alike of his present or future.

He knew that he was drifting away with the wreckage of humanity, whom the flood tide of folly and misfortune casts up in every great city.

It seemed that Howard had lost all ambition, and all regard for public opinion, and those with whom his work brought him in contact were not calculated to exert an elevating influence.

But would there not come an awakening?

Could it be that this promising young life was to be lost to all that made it worth living?

When Howard left his old boarding place he did not say where he was going, and so no one who knew him there was informed as to his present whereabouts or mode of living.

Meanwhile, in due time Uncle Peter and his young city friends arrived in New York.

Henry Rupert, whose guest Uncle Peter was to be while he remained in New York, resided in an elegant Madison avenue residence surrounded by everything in the way of luxury that wealth could purchase.

Henry Rupert, who had left New Hampshire forty years ago, had made a solid fortune in the great city to which he had come a poor young clerk.

On the night of Uncle Peter's arrival Mr. and Mrs. Rupert had received a call from a couple of ladies and gentlemen moving in the highest circles of New York society.

The guests were present in the grand parlor with their host and hostess when the arrival of Frank and Nellie from the country was announced.

A moment later and Nellie, radiant with the bloom which she had caught from the bracing air of the mountains, entered the room and was welcomed with affectionate kisses by her father and mother.

As soon as the first greetings were over, Nellie said:

"Oh, I must tell you. I have a surprise for you."

"Indeed! What is it?" asked Mr. Rupert.

"Why, Uncle Peter has come home with us to make you a visit."

"Well, I am right glad to hear that. My old friend of boyish days is more than welcome. But where is he?"

"In the library with Frank. He said he wanted to 'slick up a bit.'"

"Goodness! I hope he will not come to the parlor until the Smithers go away. I am sure they would be quite shocked by the manners of the rude old farmer," said Mrs. Rupert, in a whisper.

She was not at all like her husband, who was one of those open-hearted, whole-souled men whom nothing can change, and who are loyal to friendship under all circumstances.

In fact, Mrs. Rupert was purse-proud, and wanted to be aristocratic at the sacrifice of every other consideration, forgetting the time when she was a poor country girl and glad to associate with Uncle Peter as an equal. Riches had spoiled Mrs. Rupert a trifle. She was now vain, and very anxious that it should be supposed she sprang from a long line of wealthy ancestry.

"Now, Blanche, do not think of setting aside the old friend for the new; remember that hearts are priceless, but you can buy diamonds," said Henry Rupert.

"You may say so. You haven't any pride, Henry," replied the wife.

"Oh, mamma. If you knew how well Uncle Peter treated us, and how good he is, you would not say a word against him, though he is from the country, and so funny and old-fashioned," said Nellie.

"Certainly I shall treat him well," replied Mrs. Rupert.

"I knew you would, Blanche," replied the lady's husband.

As he spoke Frank entered the room and was received as affectionately as his sister had been.

"Where's Uncle Peter?" asked Nellie.

"Why he was right behind me on the stairs. Oh, here he is now," said Frank.

Then Uncle Peter entered the room. He was a funny-looking old fellow, surely.

His old-fashioned country clothing contrasted strangely with the garments worn by the other gentlemen present, and his cowhide boots, well greased, looked comically out of place. Under his arm Uncle Peter carried a faded cotton umbrella, and a red handkerchief hung from the pocket in the skirt of his coat. His hat was a low-crowned, wide-brimmed felt, which was worn some thirty years ago.

Taken all in all, Uncle Peter was, as Mrs. Rupert remarked, sotto voce to her husband, "a picture."

Uncle Peter seemed dazed at first by the splendor of the brilliantly illuminated room.

But he caught sight of his old friend as he paused on the threshold, and then he made straight for him, exclaiming:

"Hank Rupert, by gosh! How do yeou do, Hank? Glad tu see yeou, by chowder."

"And I am very glad to see you, Peter," replied Henry Rupert, warmly.

"And Blanche, too—'Old Claver's Blanche' from up in New Hampshire, she is. How de do, Blanche? You've changed a right good bit since we used to wade barefooted in the creek back of the school-house. Don't you remember that summer when we used to go to school barefooted down to the corners?" said Uncle Peter, as he seized Mrs. Rupert's hand.

That good lady looked daggers and tried to shut Uncle Peter up, but it was in vain.

"I'll bet now yeou haven't forgot how you used to milk the cows an' weed the garden. We were all poor folks together in those days, but then we were very happy."

Thus Uncle Peter rattled on.

But Mrs. Rupert turned away red as a poppy, as she saw the Smithers smiling at her discomfiture.

She felt that Mrs. Smithers was enjoying her "humiliation," as she afterward told her husband.

But she was a woman of finesse, and she remarked to the Smithers in an undertone, presently:

"Our friend from the country is very odd and old-fashioned, but so wealthy. We rather enjoy his eccentricities, don't you know."

"So I observed," answered Mrs. Smithers so meekly that Mrs. Rupert hardly knew whether she was sincere or only chaffing.

"Well, well, Hank, I little thought you would get to be a New York merchant prince. Gosh! you have got things fixed up here slick as a red wagon," said Uncle Peter, as Mrs. Rupert turned away.

"Oh, yes. We're quite comfortable. But take a seat, Peter, and we'll talk over old times," replied Mr. Rupert.

He pointed to a handsome patent rocker which stood in the centre of the room.

Uncle Peter sat down. The chair tipped back, and as the old fellow felt the soft cushion he gave an alarmed cry and bounded up in surprise.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Rupert.

"Gosh! I thought I'd sot down in a kettle of mush! But say, there 'hain't no rockers. What makes the tarnal thing go back on yeou?" cried Uncle Peter.

"Why, do you not see the springs between the bottom of the chair and the legs? It rocks on them, of course."

"Want tu know? Suthin' like the new swingin' churn what Eli Brownkitters got the township right fer up our way this spring, I swan. But, ge, hu! what new-fangled fixin's they do git up nowadays," said Uncle Peter.

Then he sat down and leaned back heavily. This time the rocker tipped so far he thought he was gone, and up he went.

like a rubber ball, stumbled over a foot-stool and grabbed each side of a sectional painted, ornamental screen.

The screen folded right up on Uncle Peter.

Then he was alarmed.

"Gosh! Hank, I didn't know the pesky thing was sot ready to go off. What kind of a trap is it, anyhow?" cried the old farmer, letting go of the screen, which fell in a heap.

Then he stumbled back against the wall and leaned on the bell rope. Ting-a-ling-ling went the bell below stairs.

Mr. Rupert and his guests could not restrain their laughter.

Then, in answer to the bell which Uncle Peter had rung, a neat little servant maid appeared, and, seeing the old farmer hanging on to the bell rope, she supposed he had called her.

The maid servant went up to Uncle Peter, dropped a curtsy, and said:

"Yes, sir."

Uncle Peter smiled all over.

"I guess so," he said.

"You called for me, sir," said the girl.

"Waal, now, I don't recollect it."

The girl glanced about, and she saw then that all present were trying to smother their laughter. Then she knew what had occurred, and slipped out of the room with a merry laugh.

"Guess that gal ain't quite right in the upper story, Hank. Some relation of yours, ain't she?" asked Uncle Peter, innocently.

Then there was another laugh, and Mr. Rupert explained the bell.

Uncle Peter then sat down on the patent rocker a little suspiciously, but he knew how to manage now.

"It's jist as easy tu ride as a sulky hayrake arter you know how," said the old farmer, triumphantly.

"But say, Hank, I wish you'd send your hired man after my trunk," he added, presently.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNCLE PETER IN SEARCH OF HOWARD.

"That's all right. Your trunk will come presently. I gave the check to the baggage agent on the train," explained Frank.

"I don't know about trustin' them fellers. I've heard tell New York was chuck full of sharpers," replied Uncle Peter.

"But say, Hank, what's this box with a crank to it? 'Tain't some new-fangled cornsheller now, is it?" continued Uncle Peter.

He pointed to a bell-chime musical-box which stood on a side table.

Mr. Rupert laughed, and Nellie said merrily:

"Guess what it is, Uncle Peter?"

"It's a coffee mill, sure as shootin'."

"No. Just listen," replied Nellie, and she wound up the music-box and it began to play.

"Well, I want tu know! It's a hand organ! Where's the monkey? Gosh, Hank, there ain't none of yeour folks in the organ grindin' business, is there?"

"Well, no," replied Mr. Rupert, laughing.

Just then the bell rang for dinner, and Uncle Peter was soon seated at the table, laden with elegant silver and costly china and cut glass.

He got along all right until the finger-bowls were brought on.

"Bowls," said Uncle Peter. "Well, now, that's home-like, and a good drink of cold water is right timely," and he lifted the finger-bowl to his lips and drained it at a draught.

Then for the first time he unfolded his napkin, remarking:

"'Pears like you think of most everything handy down here.

This towel, now, comes in first-rate," and Uncle Peter mopped the sweat from his brow with it.

If nobody laughed it was not because they did not want to.

After the six o'clock dinner was over Uncle Peter's trunk arrived.

"Say, Hank, I'm troubled with the rhumatiz a leetle once in a while, an' if it's all the same to you, just put me in a room as nigh the surface of the earth as you can," said the old farmer.

So Mr. Rupert had Uncle Peter's trunk placed in a sleeping apartment adjoining the drawing-room.

Then the old farmer and his friend had a long talk about old times.

As may be supposed they both enjoyed the conversation very much. There was many a hearty laugh as they recalled the pranks and scrapes of their boyhood, and it was quite late when Uncle Peter finally began to yawn.

"Perhaps you would like to retire, Peter?" said his host.

"Well, I would like to go to roost, Henry, for I'm putty tired. You know we stayed over night in Boston so the young people could attend some doin's they called a recepershun, an' I didn't sleep fust-rate at the tavern."

"How was that, Peter?"

"Well, you see, the feller that showed me to my room, when he lit the light that came out of a little crooked brass pipe right in the wall, said, 'Be sure you don't blow it out when you go to bed.' Course I didn't, and I never could sleep well with a lamp burnin'."

Mr. Rupert had another laugh, and he explained about the gas.

Then Uncle Peter retired to his room.

Meanwhile it did not seem as late to the city people as to the old farmer, and they did not think of retiring. The Smithers lingered to hear Frank and Nellie sing.

Uncle Peter turned off the gas all right this time when he turned in, and, as it was very warm, he threw the window at the foot of the bed wide open to admit the air. Just at the side of the window, partially in the corner, stood a suit of antique armor, helmet and all, suspended from a bracket, above which was a beautiful ebony corner cabinet in which stood a handsome cuckoo clock. A silk curtain on a brass pole across the corner concealed the armor. The chambermaid had drawn it to protect the armor from the dust while she was sweeping and airing the chamber, and had neglected to push it aside again. Uncle Peter therefore failed to see the suit of mail when he retired.

But the old farmer was suddenly awakened from a sound sleep by the clock chiming the hour.

He had never heard the like.

"Wonder, now, if a bird has flown in here. Gosh! I guess so, fer I left the winder open," muttered Uncle Peter.

It was a bright moonlight night, and the old farmer could see about the room pretty distinctly. The wind had blown the curtain aside from over the suit of armor, and as Uncle Peter glanced at the window, while yet the clock chimed the bird call, he saw the suit of mail as the light fell upon its burnished meshes.

It looked for all the world like a gigantic man.

Uncle Peter had read of the burglars of New York.

He thought one had entered his room now, and his hair stood up on end.

The next moment he made a flying leap out of the bed, grabbed his trunk, and dashed out of the bedroom into the parlor in his night shirt.

"Thieves! Robbers! Help! Murder!" yelled Uncle Peter, dashing through the parlor, dragging his trunk after him.

Uncle Peter made for the door leading to the street entrance.

Mr. Rupert ran to the bedroom and looked in. In a moment he comprehended what had frightened Uncle Peter, and he

fell into a chair convulsed with laughter as he explained to his guests.

Frank went after Uncle Peter. His mistake was made clear to him, and he finally went back to bed again.

The guests went home that night convulsed with laughter, and they vowed they had never had more fun in one evening in all their lives.

Uncle Peter had not failed to tell Mr. Rupert all about his son Howard. The old man had opened his heart to the friend of his youth, and told him all his anxiety and fears on Howard's account.

Mr. Rupert had sympathized with Uncle Peter, and assured him that he would render him all the assistance in his power to find his boy.

The merchant said in conclusion:

"And if, as you fear, Peter, your son has fallen into evil ways, I'll do all I can to help you redeem him. Yes, yes, old friend, you and I will lead the boy back into the right track if he has strayed away from it."

The day following his arrival in the city Uncle Peter, accompanied by Frank, made a call at the wholesale house where Howard had been employed as a clerk when his father last heard of him.

Then the fond old father learned that his boy had been discharged unjustly because of the false accusation which had caused his arrest at home.

"It's a downright shame. You have turned adrift an honest boy and done him a great wrong. Put yourself in his place, an' think how you'd feel. I tell you a little Christian charity goes a good way in this world; but some folks think that and business don't hitch, and that must be your opinion," said Uncle Peter to the heads of the firm.

Then he went away, sorrowful and indignant.

Howard had given the address of his boarding-house when he wrote home, and Uncle Peter and Frank Rupert next proceeded there.

Of course Uncle Peter encountered another disappointment.

Failing to find out where Howard was, the old man was ready to despair, and he began to imagine all sorts of calamities had befallen his son.

But Frank tried to cheer Uncle Peter up as best he could.

"Never despair! New York is a large city, but we will find Howard, if he is in it yet," said Frank.

"How kin we do it? Why, we might wander about all these crowded streets for a month and not meet the poor boy. Maybe he is sick and can't write home, and maybe he's—he's dead, Frank," said Uncle Peter.

His voice broke with emotion, and there were tears in his aged eyes.

"We will hope for the best, Uncle Peter. One thing is sure—Howard ought to be a good son to have such a father. But you are not acquainted with the ways of the great city. You do not know of the many facilities there are for finding the lost. Why, we can advertise in the newspapers. Failing in that, we can apply to the police, or employ detectives. Why, we are not going to fail. We have only just commenced to look for Howard. You'll find him and take him home with you all right—take my word for it."

"Well, I wish I could think so. You are a good friend to an old man who needs help mighty bad just now, Frank. You're your father's son, sure enough," answered Uncle Peter.

"But come. Let's go back to your house for a spell. I promised Tilda to write tu her as soon as I got to New York, and I must do so now," he added.

Frank assented to return home, and Uncle Peter said as they went along:

"I don't want to call in the police to find Howard if I can help it. No, I want to find the boy by my own work. It's a foolish old man's fancy, but I'd like to meet him face to face

and take him to my heart, no matter where he is or what he has become, and let him feel that his old father's hand was ready to lift him up and bring him back to happiness if he needs a helping hand."

"Then you and I will search New York, and if in need yours shall be the hand to help your son," said Frank, fervently.

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNCLE PETER SEES SOMETHING OF THE CITY.

Uncle Peter and Frank Rupert returned to the latter's home.

The old gentleman called for writing material and it was provided.

Then Frank was amused to see Uncle Peter take off his coat and roll up his sleeves.

The old gentleman took the pen and squared himself at the writing table, and after many preparatory arrangements of paper and pen finally began to write.

"You seem to make hard work of writing, Uncle Peter," said Frank.

"Well, 'tis hard work for me. Ruther do a half day's plowin' than write a letter any time," replied the old farmer.

Frank and Uncle Peter were in the library, and while the latter laboriously scrawled his letter to Aunt Tilda the former, true to his promise, wrote to Ruth Everheart and told her he had begun the search for Howard.

When Uncle Peter had finished writing his letter he said with a deep sigh of relief:

"Well, I've got that chore done. Now I guess I'll take it to the post office right off, 'cause I don't want Tilda to fret a mite 'bout not hearin' from me. She has enough to worry her on Howard's account, poor soul."

Frank smiled, and presently he and Uncle Peter went out again.

"It will not be necessary for you to go to the post office to mail your letter, Uncle Peter. Just drop it in the letter-box yonder," said Frank, pointing to a letter-box on a lamp-post.

"You don't tell me that's a post office, Frank?"

"It amounts to that, Uncle Peter."

"Want to know! Well, well! what won't they git up next?"

Uncle Peter, instructed by Frank, dropped his letter in the box, a trifle distrustfully.

"Sure it's safe here, right out on the street, with nobody 'tendin' the office?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, perfectly so."

"Well, I don't know about that, by gosh! Seems to me a pesky risky way to run a post office, come right down to it."

"It's all right, but now if you'll excuse me for a few moments, I'll run up to the insurance office yonder. I've a little business to transact there for father. You can amuse yourself while I am gone by walking a block or so if you like. I'll meet you here again in about fifteen minutes," said Frank.

"All right, Frank, I'll look around a bit."

Frank walked away.

"I ain't quite easy about Tilda's letter," soliloquized Uncle Peter as he walked on.

Then he noticed the familiar sign, "Post no bills," on a wall near by.

"That's a good idee. I s'pose they tack 'em up so they can take 'em in when it rains. The cirkis fellers that covers my red barn with picters every spring ought to know about that," mused Uncle Peter.

Just then he saw a lady approach from around the corner

and go to the letter box. She placed a package of newspapers on it, and Uncle Peter watched her with great interest.

"By gosh, now! Wonder if she means to leave them papers layin' right out there where the first feller that comes along kin help himself?" said Uncle Peter as the lady walked on.

"Certainly," replied a smart-looking youth, who was near enough to hear what Uncle Peter said.

The young fellow had a comrade with him, and they were smoking cigarettes and talking about the old farmer who had attracted their attention as one they might have some fun with.

"Yes, you see the lady was contributing to the free newspaper distribution service. Any one desiring to read helps himself. Same idea as the free library scheme, only you don't have to return the papers," the smart youth went on.

"Want tu know. Well, that's clever," replied Uncle Peter, and the boys walked away.

"Guess I might as well help myself. Want tu send some papers home tu Tilda, anyway," muttered Uncle Peter.

Besides the papers the lady had placed on the box there were a number of other packages heaped up there, and, going to the box, the old farmer began to stuff the papers into his pockets.

But a policeman was watching him, and he darted forward and seized him by the collar and threatened to run him in. But Uncle Peter explained, and when he saw how really green he was the officer let him go.

A few moments later a young man passed and dropped a pocketbook.

"You have dropped something!" called Uncle Peter, picking it up.

"Oh, yes, my pocketbook, and it contains five hundred dollars!" cried the sharper, taking the pocketbook and opening it.

Uncle Peter saw it was filled with one-hundred-dollar bank notes.

"You have done me a great service. You must let me reward you," the young man went on.

"No, no. You are welcome."

"But I insist. You must take fifty dollars. I won't take a refusal."

"Well, if you say I must, all right, stranger."

"But unfortunately I've nothing less than a hundred-dollar note. Oh, I see how we'll fix it. Here, take this hundred-dollar note and give me fifty dollars change."

"All right," said Uncle Peter, taking the one hundred-dollar bill and pulling out his pocketbook.

Uncle Peter began to count out fifty dollars, when fortunately Frank returned.

"Hold on, Uncle Peter, what are you giving this man money for?" Frank cried.

"Why, I found his pocketbook an' he wants to give me fifty dollars reward. I'm changin' a one hundred-dollar bill for him."

"You git," cried Frank, pointing at the confidence man.

That individual took to his heels at once.

"Well, Frank, you wasn't a bit perlit," said Uncle Peter.

"That fellow is a swindler. He gave you a counterfeit one hundred-dollar bill to change. I've heard of the game. It's an improvement on the old way of working the pocketbook dropping game."

"Want tu know? An' he seemed like sich a nice young fellow, too."

"They all do," replied Frank. "And now, Uncle Peter, I find I shall have to go to the main office of the insurance company. Do you think you can find your way home alone?"

"Oh, yes. I tuck the barin's as I came along."

"Well, then, I'll leave you, and this afternoon we will go out and continue our search for Howard."

"All right, Frank."

Uncle Peter thought he would walk around a little before he returned to the Rupert residence. He wandered to Sixth avenue, and there he sighted the elevated road. There was no train in sight.

"Hello! Waal, here's another good idee. They hev. went and put up that scaffoldin' tu make the street shady 'stead of plantin' trees, I s'pose!" thought Uncle Peter.

Just then a train came thundering by, and Uncle Peter dodged through an open door into a cigar store.

"Thunder! I thought them cars was a-comin' right down on tu my head. Je Hu! I never heard tell they had got to sendin' railroad keers by telegraph before," the old farmer exclaimed in amazement.

Uncle Peter walked on, musing upon the wonders of the city, when all at once he paused before a restaurant, over the door of which he read the sign, "Dairy Kitchen."

"Well, now, that's real home-like. Didn't 'spect tu find a

dairy right here in the city," thought Uncle Peter, and he went in.

Uncle Peter saw a number of persons seated at the tables, and waiters were moving about in white aprons.

There was a cashier behind the counter near the door.

No one noticed Uncle Peter, and he stood looking about him wonderingly.

Presently he approached the cashier, and asked:

"Where's the dairy?"

"Right here, sir," answered the other, with an amused smile.

"I swan! Want tu know! Where du yu keep yeour cows?" The cashier laughed.

"All them fellers your hired men?" Uncle Peter went on.

"Yes."

"S'pose they wear white aprons to keep frum spillin' their clothes when they do the milkin', eh?"

"Oh, no; this is a restaurant—an eating-house."

"Want tu know! Have plenty of milk, I s'pose?"

"Yes. Take a seat and look over the bill of fare, if you desire a lunch."

Uncle Peter did so, and a waiter came to his side.

"Well, I guess I'll take some puddin' an' milk. Ain't very hungry yit," said the old farmer.

"We can give you bread and milk, sir. No pudding."

"Sho, then I won't eat," replied Uncle Peter. "This 'ere is another swindlin' shop, I guess. 'Tain't no dairy, an' I guess I better git out."

With that Uncle Peter started for the street, with his hand on his pocketbook.

Then he started to go back to Mr. Rupert's, but he went the wrong way. Finally a policeman set him right, and he arrived at his friend's residence safely.

Of course he had to relate his adventures, much to the amusement of the Rupert family.

The next day Uncle Peter and Frank wandered all over the city, and at night Frank had a thrilling adventure, in which poor, unfortunate Howard played a startling part.

CHAPTER XIX.

HAPPY JACK TURNS UP AGAIN.

The following morning Uncle Peter was up about the time the early vender of the "lacteal," otherwise the festive milkman, began to awaken those who wanted to sleep with the clatter of his wagon.

Of course no one was astir at that early hour at the Rupert residence except the servants.

"How folks du sleep here! But I s'pose it's because they sit up half the night. Well, I guess I'll go out an' take a walk afore breakfast. S'pose it will be 'bout two hours 'fore that's ready," mused Uncle Peter.

Then he started out with considerable confidence in his ability to find his way about the city alone.

Uncle Peter had not walked far when a bootblack accosted him.

"Touch up yer skates fer you, uncle?" cried the urchin.

"Skates! Good land, boy, what do you mean? I hain't had on skates in twenty years."

"Oh, black yer boots! That's what I mean. Give yer a patent leather shine you can see to shave yourself in when you get home, for a nickel."

"Allers grease my own boots, boy," replied Uncle Peter, walking on toward a little girl who stood on the next corner with a few morning papers under her arm, crying bitterly.

"Paper, sir? Paper?" the little waif said through her tears.

"Yes. I'll take all you've got. You look as though you needed the money, but what are you crying about?"

"Father just came along and took away all the money I'd earned this morning, and mother is so sick. I wanted the money for her."

"Well, your father ought to be ashamed of himself. Here's a dollar. Now run home with it to your mother, and you can keep your papers, too."

Uncle Peter gave the child a bright new silver dollar.

"Oh, you are a good, kind old gentleman," said the little one, but as she was gladly turning away a rough-looking man came out of a saloon and seized her.

"Gimme that dollar, Kit," he growled.

"Oh, please don't take it away from me, father," pleaded the child.

"See here, you miserable critter, let that little gal go or I'll kick you down, if you be her father!" cried Uncle Peter.

The fellow turned upon him with a fierce expression on his bloated face, as he said:

"Maybe yeou don't know who I am, Country? I'm the Har-lem Pet, an' I'll sit on your shirt collar if you don't move on about your business."

The little girl broke away from her father and retreated behind Uncle Peter.

"Well, I'm Peter Weatherall, from New Hampshire, by gosh! Yeou want to go an' git a ladder if you sit on my shirt collar, by chowder!" said Uncle Peter.

Two spruce-looking young men had come to the door of the saloon, and they heard Uncle Peter give his name, and exchanged significant glances.

"No man 'sults Bill Joggs, drunk er sober, without payin' fer it!" cried the little girl's brutal, drunken father, and he made a start at Uncle Peter.

But just then the two young men at the saloon door came forward. One of them gave Joggs a knowing wink, and made some remark in an undertone, and Joggs walked off muttering.

"Why, Mr. Weatherall, how do you do? How's all the folks up in New Hampshire?" cried one of the young men, and he seized Uncle Peter's hand and shook it warmly.

"Well, stranger, I'm glad to see you, but you've got the advantage of me. I don't place you."

"Oh, don't you remember little Tommy Smith?"

"Not Jerry Smith's boy, Tom?"

"Yes—yes."

"Well—well, I am glad to see you. Thought you were clerk-in' in Boston, though."

"I've just come to New York, and I'm a lucky fellow. I bought a ticket in a lottery, and it has drawn the five thousand-dollar prize—"

"Come, that will do; Dick Blye, I want you!" cried a stern voice, and a tall, powerful man, who had suddenly dodged around the corner, seized the young man who was conversing with Uncle Peter by the collar. His companion took to his heels.

In a moment the detective—for such the stranger was—had handcuffed the confidence man, and, turning to Uncle Peter, he said:

"You have had a narrow escape. This fellow is the most dangerous bunco man in New York, and I've been after him for a long time."

Then he led his prisoner away, leaving Uncle Peter standing dumb with amazement.

"I don't want never to live in sich a wicked place as New York for steady diet. Seems tu me every other man I meet is after my pocketbook. But come along, little gal, and I'll go home with you," said Uncle Peter.

The little girl led the way to a miserable room in a tenement house. On the way Uncle Peter asked:

"Don't no one help you and your poor mother in all this great, big city?"

No, sir. Only one person, sir. He is a poor young working man, and he can't spare much, but every Saturday he brings us something."

"What's the young feller's name?"

"Howard!"

"What! Say that again, little girl! What's the rest of his name?" cried Uncle Peter, in intense excitement.

"I don't know his other name. Just Howard—that's all he told me."

"It may be that he is my lost boy! Tell me what he looks like, little one."

The child gave a description of a young man in her own way.

Then Uncle Peter uttered a cry of joy, for he felt almost certain that the little one's friend was Howard, his son.

"When will the young feller come to your house again?" asked Uncle Peter, eagerly.

"He never comes only Saturday nights, and this is Thursday."

"If he should come before that tell him to call at No.—Madison avenue," said Uncle Peter.

"I will, sir."

"I'll be at your house Saturday night, little one, and if Howard does not come until then, keep him with you until I see him."

"Yes, sir."

Then they entered the room which was the poor little girl's home, and Uncle Peter saw an emaciated woman upon a miserable couch.

The kind-hearted old farmer sent for a physician and needed

food, and before he went away he left a small sum of money with the little girl, who promised to hide it from her drunken father.

"It's just like Howard, such a kind heart as the boy has. I am almost sure he is the charitable young man who has befriended this poor family," said Uncle Peter.

He was late for breakfast at the Rupert residence, but he got back there without further adventure, and he was quite happy in the thought that if he did not find Howard before he might meet him at the house of the little news girl on Saturday night. But now to return to Howard.

One evening after his day's work along the dock Howard felt particularly miserable and despondent, and he went into a saloon, intending only to take one drink.

But again his appetite conquered. There were a number of Howard's fellow-workmen in the saloon, and at their invitation he drank and drank again. The next morning he was unable to go to his work, and when he did present himself at his old place he found another man in his place, and he was discharged.

Without a cent in his pocket, trembling in every limb, his nerves on edge, so to say, and experiencing all the horrors of one who is feeling the reaction which succeeds a debauch, his lips and throat parched, a mad feeling that he must have a drink or die pervading him, for hours Howard wandered on the street.

At last in his desperation he accosted a young man who was passing, and implored the price of a drink.

The young man whom Howard had stopped was elegantly dressed. He had a smiling face, and seemed to be prosperous and happy. Howard thought bitterly of the time, not long ago, when he, too, was prosperous, and the world smiled upon him.

"You want money, eh? Well, you look as though you needed it. You have been on a spree. Now, I'll help you. I've been there myself, and I know how you feel. You want to get a drink of whisky to tone up your nerves a bit, and then go and eat something. Here's a dollar. Now mind, only one drink and then a good meal. You look like a smart young fellow. Pull yourself together. Let whisky alone, and you'll come out all right yet," said the young gentleman, and then he gave Howard a dollar.

"I'll try to take your advice; it's the best I've heard in many a day," replied Howard.

Then thanking the kindly young fellow he hurried to a saloon and the other passed on.

The afternoon after his morning visit to the home of the little news girl, Uncle Peter was again on the street alone, when the same young man who had given Howard the dollar came up and accosted him.

But first the young man said to himself, as he saw Uncle Peter approaching:

"As sure as I live, yonder is my benefactor, the old New England farmer. I wonder if he will recognize me as Happy Jack, the rover?"

The young man was really the tramp whom Uncle Peter had befriended at the old homestead.

"How do you do, Mr. Weatherall? I am delighted to meet you!" cried Happy Jack, extending his hand as he and the old farmer met.

"No, you don't! I've had that played on me before," said Uncle Peter, recollecting his experience with the confidence man.

Happy Jack understood, and he laughed as he said:

"Why, don't you remember me?"

"No; you don't remember me, nuther. You're another of them confidence fellers. Now yeou go on, or I'll knock yeou down, by gosh!"

"Hold on, Uncle Peter—hold on, and I'll convince you. Now, don't you recollect the tramp who came to your homestead last summer, and to whom you gave a five-dollar bill, and, what was better, good advice?"

"Yes, I recollect that feller you speak of."

"Well, I'm Happy Jack, the tramp."

"Shaw! you can't fool me. I'm up tu yeour New York tricks now, young man."

CHAPTER XX.

UNCLE PETER DISCOVERS MORE WONDERS, BUT DOES NOT FIND HOWARD.

Uncle Peter was about to pass on.

"One moment," said Happy Jack, earnestly.

"Well, what more hev you got to say, I want tu know?"

"I want to prove I am the man your kind advice and your money saved when he was about as low as a man can well be."

There was something so earnest and feeling in the young man's tone that Uncle Peter paused again.

"Well, now, what did I say tu you at the farm? Jist tell me my own words, will ye?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll do that. You recalled the recollection of my mother, and told me the duty I owed to her. You appealed to my manhood. That was the substance of your words."

"By gosh, that's so! But wait a bit. What did you say after I gave you the money?"

"I said I'd do my best, and give old king alcohol the toughest wrestle for the underhold he ever had."

"Je hu! I ruther think you are Happy Jack!"

"And here is the five dollars you gave me," replied Happy Jack, and he handed Uncle Peter a crisp new five-dollar note.

"Now I know you are Happy Jack. Shake!" cried Uncle Peter, as he took the money.

Happy Jack grasped the old farmer's hand and wrung it warmly.

"You made a man of me, Uncle Peter."

"So I see. You took my advice, didn't ye?"

"I did. It was a hard struggle, but I got the best of my rum appetite and then I prospered. I've got a splendid situation now, and owe it all to you."

"Want tu know!"

"Yes. I am getting twenty-five hundred dollars a year as bookkeeper for Mr. Henry Rupert, the great wholesale dry goods merchant."

"You don't say so. Why, Henry Rupert is an old friend of mine. We was boys together, an' I'm visitin' at his house now. You see I come down to the city to look up my son Howard. I haven't heard from him in a long time, and I'm afraid he's gone wrong."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I never met your son that I know of. If I should chance to find out anything about him, I'll be sure to let you know."

"What's your real name, Happy?"

"Jack Saunders, Uncle Peter."

"Well, call around and see me, Jack."

"I guess I'll wait for an invitation from my employer," said Jack, laughing, and he added:

"I think I'll take a run up to your farm during September, when I take my vacation."

"Do, so, Jack. We'd all be tickled to have you."

There was some further conversation between the two, after which they separated.

Uncle Peter felt happy to think that he had been instrumental in saving the young man who had so completely reformed.

The old farmer as he walked along the street fell to reflecting about Howard. Then it occurred to him that since he had befriended the little news girl, it might be he lived somewhere in the neighborhood of her home.

"I'll send for Frank Rupert, and we'll make a search in the neighborhood of the leetle girl's quarters. I don't want to go away up to Frank's house after him myself," said Uncle Peter, mentally.

Then he stepped into a store and asked where he could find a boy to send on an errand.

"You can call a messenger boy from here, or, if you wish, you can use the telephone."

"Telephone? That's somethin' like telegraphin', ain't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you just work the machine, and send word to Frank Rupert, No. — Madison avenue, to come here, and I'll pay the charges."

"Very well, sir," replied the clerk, and he turned to the telephone and rang up the general office.

"Give me No. — Madison avenue," he said, when he got an answer.

"All right," came the reply.

Then the clerk telephoned to the address given, and when he had received the answer he turned to Uncle Peter and said:

"Mr. Rupert says he will come here at once."

"You don't say he's got the message and answered it already?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, je hu! That is handy. Say, just send my overcoat up tu Frank's house by telephone. It's gettin' too warm for it today," said Uncle Peter, handing the clerk his overcoat in all good faith.

"We haven't attached the improvement for sending parcels yet. We can only send messages now," said the clerk, laughing.

"Well, never mind, then."

Uncle Peter sat down, and Frank soon joined him, and then they set out to explore the neighborhood of the little news girl's home.

They spent the day thus.

Every saloon and public place in the vicinity was visited, but without success.

Finally Uncle Peter declared he was getting tired, and they started for home.

The air was rather impure in the locality which they had visited.

"By gosh!" cried Uncle Peter. "I'd give suthin' for a good whiff of pure country air!"

"Well, I can give you something like it."

"Where? Jist tell me where, Frank, an' I'm off fer the spot like a shot."

"We'll go to Central Park."

"All right. Meant to see that, anyhow, 'fore I went home. Merlinda Stebbins went there when she was down tu York on her weddin' trip ten years ago, and she hain't done talkin' of it yit."

"Well, we'll take a Sixth avenue elevated train to Fifty-ninth street."

"What! Ride on them cars upon the scaffolds! No, no, not any fer yer Uncle Peter, Frank. Common everyday hoss cars is good enough fer me. Jist as soon go up in a balloon as ride up on them things."

Frank could not persuade Uncle Peter to ride on the elevated road, and so they finally took a horse car.

Uncle Peter was delighted with Central Park.

But Frank observed that Uncle Peter paid a good deal of attention to the children accompanied by nurse girls in white caps and aprons. The park was thronged with little tots that day.

"You seem to be fond of children, Uncle Peter" said Frank.

"So I am. But I was jist thinkin' it must be there was some rule in ther city fer mothers tu wear that white cap an' apron uniform. Every woman that's got children has um on, and another thing, Frank, I never saw so many young married wimin together."

Frank laughed and explained. Then he guided Uncle Peter to the menagerie.

There the old farmer was pleased very much, and when they went away he said:

"By gosh, Frank, it's better than a cerkiss, an' free, tu."

They went up through the "ramble," and Uncle Peter sat down by one of the upper lakes which is full of catfish.

Frank strolled away.

Uncle Peter saw some children throwing bits of crackers to the fish, and soon became aware that the lake was swarming with them.

"Je hu! The pond is chuck full of bullheads. Durn my buttons ef I don't catch a mess fur supper, an' surprise Frank when he gits back!" said Uncle Peter.

"Guess I've some fish-hooks in my terbacker-box. Allers carry some there, and I've got a bit of twine that will do for a line," he went on.

In a trice he found a fish-hook in his tobacco-box, fastened it to a string he had in his pocket, kicked over a stone, and found some worms for bait.

Then he began to haul out the catfish as fast as he could throw in his line.

Uncle Peter was hard at it when Frank came hastening back.

"Good gracious, Uncle Peter! It's against the law to fish here, and if the park policemen should see you they would arrest you!" he cried, as soon as he discovered what Uncle Peter was up to.

"Want tu know! Less throw the fish back in ag'in quick, then," cried Uncle Peter, very much frightened, and the old man hustled the catfish back into the lake as fast as possible.

"What do they do with the fish in these park ponds, anyhow, Frank?" Uncle Peter asked.

"That's one of those things no fellow can find out."

Uncle Peter was pretty well tired out when he and Frank returned home. He said:

"I won't go out any more to-night."

"No. It's not necessary that you should. But I've thought that the reason we did not find Howard in the neighborhood of the little news girl's home might be because he is employed during the day. If so, at night will be the time to search for him among the saloons of that quarter, and I mean to get a friend to accompany me and make the rounds to-night," said Frank.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOWARD ARRESTED—A SERIOUS MISTAKE.

"That's a good idee, Frank—a good idee," assented Uncle Peter, approving of the young man's project.

The locality in which the home of Kit, the little news girl, was situated was not a very reputable one, and Frank Rupert's knowledge of the city convinced him that his proposed visit to the numerous drinking places in that quarter might not be entirely unattended with danger.

But Frank was a fearless youth, and he did not stop to reflect long upon the possibility of peril.

"Who are you goin' to take with yeou, Frank? Come right down tu it, I guess I'll go along with you myself, as I want to be the one to find Howard," said Uncle Peter, reconsidering his decision not to go out again that night.

The old farmer had seated himself in a great easy chair, and, arising, he said:

"Where did yer father git that cheer, Frank. I swan, it's jist like it was stuffed with one of Tilda's feather beds."

Then Uncle Peter started to get his hat, but he limped a little now, as Frank observed.

"Why, Uncle Peter, you seemed all right when you came home, but now you are lame," Frank said.

"Yes. You see, I tried not tu show it. Ever since I sprained my ankle, just last spring, clearin' up the ten-acre lot, I've had to favor that leg some. It's no use, Frank, I'm tu lame to go out ag'in to-night, after all."

"Well, if I am lucky enough to find Howard, I'll bring him right here. So it will be almost the same as if you accompanied me."

"It will have to be that way, Frank."

Just then Mr. Rupert, Frank's father, entered. Frank was putting on his gloves.

"Going out, Frank?" asked his father.

"Yes. I am going out to look through a certain section of the east side for Howard."

"Well, you had better not go alone."

"No, I shall take Jack Saunders, your bookkeeper, with me. He's a splendid fellow, and brave as a lion."

"You could not have a better companion. Jack Saunders is the best bookkeeper and the most trustworthy young man I ever had in my employ."

"Glad tu hear it. It was a good job my settin' that young feller right," muttered Uncle Peter.

"What's that?" asked Mr. Rupert.

"Oh, nothin'," replied Uncle Peter, who presumed Jack Saunders would not have desired him to recall the past.

"Take care of yourself, Frank, and come home as early as you can," said Mr. Rupert.

"Yes, Frank. I shan't sleep a wink till you come home, if you are gone all night, and if you find him, Frank, tell him his old father is waiting for him, and praying that he may return to him," said Uncle Peters.

"I will do so. Now, good-night. Be of good cheer, Uncle Peter," replied Frank.

Then he went out.

Frank Rupert and Jack Saunders were friends.

From the time when the latter first entered his father's service Frank had been drawn to Jack, whose happy disposition and excellent qualities always made him a general favorite.

After leaving home, Frank Rupert went directly to Jack Saunders' house. Jack lived at home with his parents, who were very fairly well to do.

Frank found his young friend at home, and when he had stated the object of his call, Jack readily consented to accompany him and aid him in the search for Howard.

The two young men went at once to the neighborhood in which Frank desired to make a further search for the farmer's son.

The locality to which they repaired presented an entirely different appearance in the early evening from what it did at night.

While by day comparative quietude reigned there, now all was noise and confusion. The warm weather caused the populace to throng the streets, seeking the cool air of the evening. The saloons were thronged, men and women occupied every door-step, and numerous ragged children played upon the pavement.

Frank and Jack Saunders made their way from one saloon to another.

They entered many drinking places, and scanned their inmates, only to meet with disappointment.

"I am afraid, Jack, that we shall not find him, after all. Perhaps we had better return home now," said Frank, finally, as they were in a low barroom, at the further end of which a number of rough-looking men were assembled about a table drinking and conversing in a loud and boisterous manner, which told they were partially intoxicated.

"What! Getting discouraged so soon! That is not like Frank Rupert. You surprise me, Frank. There are more saloons to visit hereabouts," said Jack, and he unconsciously spoke quite loud.

Among the men who were drinking about the table in the rear of the saloon was Howard.

Frank Rupert had looked upon him without recognizing him. As Frank had never seen Howard in person before, and had only the recollection of the portrait which he had seen at the old farm-house to guide him, it is not to be wondered that he failed to recognize Howard now.

The farmer's son had changed greatly since he left his peaceful home among the hills of New Hampshire to seek his fortune amid the strife and turmoil of the great city.

Now Howard's face was red and sunburnt, and a beard of a week's growth covered his face. He had become careless of his appearance as his decadence from respectability progressed, and as he was now, even an old acquaintance might have passed him by without recognizing him.

Howard was intoxicated and reckless now, but he heard the name Frank Rupert pronounced by Jack, and he comprehended that the man who had supplanted him in the affections of Ruth Everheart, as he supposed, stood before him.

That name was graven on his memory. The mania of rum was strong upon him, and a fierce, passionate longing to take vengeance upon his rival came upon him. His brain was on fire. The demon alcohol made all his worst passions dominant and robbed him of reason.

He arose from the table, his fierce and blood-shot eyes glaring upon Frank Rupert with a look of savage menace.

But Frank and his companion had turned their backs upon him, and they did not observe his threatening look and attitude.

Howard's companions ceased their conversation. Intoxicated as they were, there was that in Howard's manner that told them he meditated some deed of violence.

"It is he! He who robbed me of all I had to love! Ah, he shall answer to me now! He shall feel my vengeance!" muttered Howard fiercely.

Then he strode toward the unconscious object of his wrath and mistaken fury.

Howard's comrades made no effort to detain him, and he reached Frank Rupert's side.

Then with a savage cry he sprang upon the young man and dealt him a blow that felled him to the floor.

Jack Saunders seized Howard as Frank fell, and in a moment the saloon was a scene of confusion.

Some one at the door shouted:

"Police! Police!"

Howard's comrades surged toward Jack Saunders and Howard as they clinched. But as they looked into each other's faces they made a mutual recognition.

"My dollar investment!" cried Jack.

"The man who befriended me!" exclaimed Howard.

Then he released Jack and threw himself before his comrades, who meant to champion his cause and assault the two strangers.

"Back, all of you! Back, I say!" thundered Howard.

At that moment two burly policemen rushed into the saloon.

"Arrest that ruffian! He assaulted me!" cried Frank, regaining his feet. The officers seized Howard, and he was hurried away—sent to a prison cell by the very friend who had come to save him.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOWARD BEFORE THE POLICE COURT.

Howard, powerless to escape, was marched along the street between the two officers who had arrested him.

Frank and Jack Saunders left the saloon in company with the police officers, and kept close to them until they were out of the dangerous neighborhood.

It was well for them that they did so, for otherwise they would certainly have been attacked by Howard's comrades.

The latter followed the police officers for some distance, muttering threats against Frank and his companion.

The rough fellows who had become the associates of the farmer's son saw that Frank and Jack were above them in the social grade, and they called after them, designating them as "bloody dudes," and the like.

When the police and the two young men were about to separate, one of the officers asked their names.

They gave them promptly.

"Will you appear against the prisoner?" asked the spokesman of the police.

"Yes," replied Frank, who was still smarting from the blow he had received at Howard's hands. "The fellow's assault was entirely unprovoked. I never saw him or exchanged a word with him in my life."

Frank was determined that the man who had assaulted him should be punished to the full extent of the law.

Howard said nothing.

He had shut himself up in sullen silence.

The episode of the arrest had sobered him up to some extent, however, and he began to realize his position.

He had never been arrested before since he was unjustly accused of the robbery of the Clingville bank.

Then the disgrace was keenly felt.

Now, however, Howard cared little what became of him, and yet, as the fumes of alcohol released their hold upon his brain, he regretted his conduct.

"Fool that I was; I have only injured myself, while the man who came between me and Ruth will see me sent to prison for this night's folly," thought Howard.

Left alone in a cell of the station-house to which he was consigned for the night, Howard became more and more despondent as he regained his reason.

When morning dawned at last, dark and dismal—one of those days that depress the spirits of those susceptible to external influences—Howard was yet wide awake, and nervously pacing his cell.

The young clerk had not closed his eyes in sleep the livelong night.

When the first gray light fell through the grated window of his cell, the young prisoner sank upon his knees beside the hard couch in the corner of the cell.

A flood-tide of recollection came upon him like a resistless torrent of remorse, and in his misery—for the first time in many a day—he supplicated assistance from a power above that of man.

The hours drew on, and finally an officer appeared to conduct Howard to the police court where his preliminary examination would take place.

Meanwhile Frank Rupert and Jack Saunders made their way homeward after parting with the policemen.

When Frank reached home he found Uncle Peter in the library waiting for him, although it was after midnight and the rest of the household had retired.

The poor old father's weather-beaten face looked white and wan in the gaslight, and the lines of anxiety were deeply drawn upon his brow.

He started up as Frank, who had admitted himself with his night-key, entered the library.

"Alone!" the old man said, in pitiful tones, as he saw not the beloved one whom he had hoped and prayed might return with Frank.

"Yes, alone, Uncle Peter," said Frank feelingly.

"But did you find out nothin' 'bout the boy?"

"No. I am sorry to say it, Uncle Peter, but my night search has been without result."

Uncle Peter sat down and bowed his gray head wearily upon his hands, while Frank continued:

"I made a close search through most of the public resorts in the vicinity of the little news girl's home. Howard was in none of them."

"Well, I will not give way to disappointment yet, Frank. Saturday night I'll find him. But the idee is strong upon me that Howard is in trouble. I fell inter a doze a bit ago an' I had a dream. I thought Howard was calling me to come to his help."

Frank found it difficult to console Uncle Peter, and he persuaded him to retire to his bed.

In the morning Frank knew that if he meant to appear against the man who had assaulted him and press the charge for which he was held, he must go to the police court.

Frank was half inclined to relent, and not appear against the man whom he had encountered.

But as he promised the officers to do so when they made the arrest—and he always kept his word—he finally left the house and proceeded toward the police court.

Before going out he asked for Uncle Peter, and, a little to his surprise, he was informed that he had gone out without

saying a word to any one immediately after breakfast, while he (Frank) was engaged with some correspondence.

"Poor Uncle Peter, no doubt he felt too uneasy about his son to remain quiet. Well, it will be a relief to him to walk about the streets, for he will see much to divert his thoughts," reflected Frank.

* * * * *

When Howard was led from the cell in the police-station where he had passed the night he was conducted a short distance along the street to the police court.

Kit, the little news girl, saw and recognized him as he was being marched along by the officer, for it chanced that she was selling the morning papers near by.

Suddenly the burly officer who had Howard in charge felt a little hand tugging at his arm, and the plaintive voice of the child said, earnestly:

"Please, officer, don't take him to prison. I know he isn't a bad man, for he helped us when poor mamma was so sick. Oh, do let him go!"

"God bless you, little one. You at least can speak a good word for me when all the world is against me," said Howard, with emotion, which he could not conceal.

"Go away, child, the man is a prisoner. He must answer to the charge made against him at the police court," replied the policeman.

Kit released her hold upon the arm of the officer. His voice was kindly, and the child came around on Howard's side and seized his hand, while she looked up into his pale face. Then a look of intelligence came into her great blue eyes.

"Why, you look like the kind old gentleman who gave me the dollar. He was looking for a son named Howard. Oh! are you his son?"

"What—what do you say, child? Oh, no! it cannot be that father has come to look for me here in the great city," gasped Howard.

"Yes, I think he has. He looked so funny, but he was good—awful good—like you are, Howard."

"It must be my father. But he must never know of my present disgrace," murmured Howard.

The entrance of the police court was reached as Howard spoke, and he and the officer passed through it, leaving the little news girl standing on the street.

"I will give an assumed name again, as I did when I was brought to the police station. Let me see, I said then my name was David Brown. I must say the same now. The honest name of my poor old father shall not be disgraced in a police court," thought Howard.

Meanwhile Kit stood for a moment thinking, then she exclaimed:

"Oh, if I could only find the old farmer again! I am sure Howard is his son. The old gentleman would get him out of trouble if he only knew! Ah, I have it! The old gentleman told me to send Howard to No. — Madison avenue if he came to our house again before Saturday night. It must be Howard's father lives there. I'll go and see," thought the little news girl.

Then she sped away as fast as she could run.

Howard had a devoted friend in the little waif of the streets, whom he had assisted in the time of need, and she did not pause until she was almost out of breath.

But to return to Howard.

When he was conducted into the police court he found a number of other prisoners there waiting to have their cases disposed of.

Howard was placed among the prisoners, and shortly after that Frank Rupert entered the court-room.

Howard recognized him the moment he appeared, and he thought bitterly:

"He means that I shall not escape punishment, and he will rejoice at my disgrace."

For the moment Howard forgot that Frank Rupert was entirely ignorant of his identity.

Finally the police justice called the name of "David Brown," and Howard stepped to the bar. Then the justice asked the usual formal question: "What is the charge against this man?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNCLE PETER AND HOWARD REUNITED.

"The charge against the prisoner is drunk and disorderly conduct, and assault and battery of an aggravated sort," said the police officer who had arrested Howard in response to the justice.

"Where are the witnesses?"

"Myself, Officer Shehan and the gentleman upon whom the assault was made are present, your honor," said one of the policemen.

At that moment, and before the routine of the police court trial could proceed further, there was a commotion at the door.

The proceedings were interrupted, and the annoyed justice rapped loudly with his gavel upon the desk as he called out:

"Order! Order! Officers, ascertain what is the cause of the noise in the passage outside the door, and see to it that it is stopped at once."

Every one turned toward the door of the court-room.

Almost immediately a strangely assorted couple entered.

But what of Kit, the little news girl, and how did she succeed in the mission she had undertaken on her own account in Howard's behalf?

After pausing for a moment to regain her breath, when she found herself exhausted, Kit ran onward again.

She was familiar with the city, as may well be surmised, and after proceeding a long distance on foot, she had just resolved to invest five cents which she had earned selling papers that morning in a ride, when all at once a glad cry escaped her lips.

Glancing up the street she saw Uncle Peter.

Yes, there was no mistake, the old gentleman of whom she was in search was close by.

Was it destiny or chance, the fact remained that Uncle Peter upon leaving the Rupert residence had wandered downtown by the very route which Kit had selected to go in quest of him.

Kit darted to Uncle Peter like a flash.

"Oh, I'm so glad you come! I was going after you," panted Kit.

"Why—why, what's the matter now, leetle gal?" asked Uncle Peter, kindly.

"Oh, I was so afraid I couldn't get you in time," replied Kit, beginning to whimper a little as she felt the reaction after her long run.

"Why, what did yeou want me fur? Suthin' gone wrong down to yeour house?"

"No, no. But I've found him!"

"Found who? Oh, you don't mean my boy—my boy Howard?" cried Uncle Peter.

His voice pulsated with excitement, and he caught Kit by the arm eagerly.

"Yes, that's it—I've found Howard," said Kit, wondering why she couldn't stop her tears.

"Where is he? Speak, child! Where's my boy?"

"The police officer has him."

"Oh, Heaven! But no, no! Howard is no criminal. Take me to him, child. We must not lose an instant!" cried Uncle Peter.

"It's a long way to the police court, and I'm so tired."

"We'll hire a wagon—a stree keer—anything."

"Hello, cab!" piped Kit, and an empty coupe, whose driver heard her, drove up to the curb.

"Here's a five-dollar bill, mister. Drive like mad!" cried Uncle Peter, swinging Kit into the cab and jumping in after her.

"Where to?" asked the driver, as he clutched the bank-note which Uncle Peter thrust into his hand as he spoke.

"Where to, Kit?" asked Uncle Peter.

"To the — police court. Make 'em fly, cabby!" replied Kit.

The driver cracked his whip, and the cab rattled away at a fine rate of speed.

"Whoa!" called out the driver some time subsequently.

"Here we are," he added, as he leaped down and opened the door of the coupe.

The cab stood before the door of the police court.

Uncle Peter leaped out as nimbly as a boy, and Kit followed him.

With his hat in his hand and dragging Kit by the hand, Uncle Peter made a rush for the door of the police court.

In the passage a doorman, misunderstanding the excited manner of the strangely assorted pair, and perhaps thinking Uncle Peter was intoxicated or crazy, barred their way.

"Out of the way, gol darn yeou!" cried Uncle Peter.

But the doorman did not stir.

Then Uncle Peter seized him, and a struggle ensued.

This was the cause of the excitement in the court, and the disturbance was caused by Uncle Peter and the doorman.

But a police officer appeared upon the scene, as ordered by the justice, and in a few words Uncle Peter explained the situation.

Then he and Kit were permitted to enter the court-room. As the couple came in, Howard and Frank Rupert saw Uncle Peter at the same moment.

"Uncle Peter!"

"Father!"

Thus exclaimed the two young men almost simultaneously.

But Uncle Peter saw only Howard.

With a glad cry the old man rushed to his son, and embraced him as he said in a voice broken by emotions of joy:

"Found! Found at last! Oh, Howard, my boy, my boy!"

Then Frank Rupert understood the truth, and he acted promptly. While yet father and son were exchanging glad words, he whispered to the two police officers, and then both disappeared and Frank with them.

Turning to the justice, Uncle Peter said:

"You will excuse an old man's weakness, I hope, jedge, but yeou see my boy has been lost to me for a long time, and I've only just found him. He may have gone wrong a leetle, jedge, but don't be too hard on the boy. Let him go if you can, jedge, and I'll pay the damages."

"Where are the witnesses against the young man?" asked the justice, as he glanced about for the policemen and Frank Rupert.

Just then a messenger came in and handed the justice a note, which Frank had hurriedly written outside, explaining the case.

The justice was a personal friend of Frank's father, and having read the note, he said:

"Since there is no one present to testify against the prisoner I will discharge him. Young man, you are free to go, but let this be a lesson to you for the future."

Explanations followed, and Howard learned that his friends at home had written regularly to him, though he had failed to receive their letters.

But best of all, Howard learned that Ruth was true to him, after all, and that Aunt Tilda had made a sad mistake when she wrote him to the contrary.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

"Now, Howard, we will go to Mr. Rupert's," said Uncle Peter, after he and Howard had a long conversation in a neighboring restaurant after leaving the police court.

"Not in my present condition, father," replied Howard, glancing at himself in a mirror. "I owe Frank Rupert the fullest apology, and I wish to assure him of my appreciation of his kindness to you, and for all that he has done in my behalf, but I am not at all presentable."

"Oh, we'll fix all that quicker than scat. Come, we'll go and git you a bran new suit of store clothes, and everything you need to fit you up fust class," replied Uncle Peter.

An hour or so later, after getting a shave and a bath, Howard was attired in an entire new suit from head to foot, and then he looked very much like himself.

It was about midday when Howard and Uncle Peter finally presented themselves at the Rupert residence.

Frank received them at the door. Uncle Peter introduced Howard, and the two young men shook hands. Then an explanation ensued, and Howard gracefully apologized for his assault upon his unknown friend. Everything was made clear, and Howard told Frank how grateful he was to him.

While the conversation was in progress Mr. Rupert and Jack Saunders came in. Happy Jack was as smiling as ever, and when he saw Howard he exclaimed, in surprise:

"Hello! My dollar investment, as sure as I live!"

"So you two know each other?" said Uncle Peter. "Well, if I'd a known that I might have found Howard sooner. This is my son," and he introduced Howard.

Mr. Rupert greeted Howard kindly, and said:

"I hope you, too, will be my guest during your father's stay in the city."

"Thank yeou, Hank, for myself and my son. But I think we will start fer hum this very day. What du yeou say, Howard? You will go back to the old home now, won't yeou, boy?" said Uncle Peter.

"For your sake, father, I would gladly do so. But I cannot bring myself to give up beaten. No, no. Then, too, I should not care to have people say that Howard Weatherall went to the city to make his fortune, but couldn't get along, and his father had to take him home again. Let me have one more trial, father. I've had my downfall, and have learned a bitter lesson, but now that I know you and Aunt Tilda are ready to forgive me, and that there is another true heart waiting and

hoping for my success, I feel that I have strength to retrieve the past," replied Howard.

"Yes, that is the right spirit. The boy is right, Peter. Give him one more chance, and if we do not send him home to you Christmas-time doing well and on the road to success, then my name is not Henry Rupert. There is a vacancy in my office. Another bookkeeper is needed to assist Jack here, and if Howard will take the place he is welcome to it," said Mr. Rupert, earnestly.

"Come, consent, Uncle Peter. I'll be with Howard, and he shall be my room-mate, if he likes. I've run up against the snag that set him wrong pretty hard in my time, and I know how to steer clear of it now," said Happy Jack Saunders.

"Well, well, you are all so good. Hank, old friend—I—I—sho! You know what's in my heart. I'll leave the boy with you. God bless you and Happy Jack," said the old farmer.

Howard was too deeply moved for words, but he grasped the old merchant's hand and wrung it gratefully. His manner was more eloquent than words.

And so Uncle Peter went home the next day, carrying with him a long and loving letter from Howard to Ruth, which the young clerk did not dare intrust to the mails.

When Howard and his father parted at the depot the old farmer said:

"I am pretty sure there is some underhand work goin' on in the postoffice tu hum, and I mean to find out why our letters don't come an' go same as other folks' letters do."

Uncle Peter arrived home safely, and the day was one of rejoicing and happiness for Aunt Tilda and Ruth Everheart. In the assurance of Howard's affection both found joy, and that evening there was a merry time at the old homestead.

Ab Stubbs and Josiah Perkins came over, and Peter had to narrate his adventures in the city, and Ab declared more than once that he had "never heard the like since old Bill Jones died."

But, as usual, Ab and Josiah got to quarreling, and Uncle Peter had to interpose. Aunt Tilda was busy about some household duties when the spirit of fun prompted Uncle Peter to try to work a "drive" on Ab and Josh, and at the same time accomplish a purpose of his own. The preceding summer Uncle Peter had been swindled by the lightning-rod men, and he had a grudge against the whole tribe.

When he arrived in the village on his way home from the city a sleek-looking personage by the name of Blye was introduced to him. The fellow proved to be a lightning-rod agent, and he assured Uncle Peter that he was coming up to his place the next day to show him his "wonderful double-action lightning-rods."

Uncle Peter said nothing, but he thought he recognized the fellow as one of the gang who had swindled him, and all the way home he was considering how he could get even with the rascal and keep out of trouble personally. At last Uncle Peter hit upon a plan. Now, when he found himself alone with Ab and Josiah, he assumed an expression of regret, and said mournfully:

"I will be mighty lonesome at the old place when Tilda goes away."

Ab and Josiah were at once all surprise and consternation. They exclaimed:

"What—eh? Tilda goin' away?"

"Yeou don't say Tilda's goin' to leave, Peter?"

"I'm afraid the time has come at last, boys."

"Why, gol darn it, where's Tilda goin'?" cried Ab.

"Yes, tell us where she's goin'," said Josiah.

"Well, maybe you never heard of Philander Philkins, but he was mighty sweet on Tilda the winter she was up tu Clingville a-learnin' dressmakin' 'bout thirty years ago. Well, I met Philkins in Nu York, an' he told me he hadn't forgot Tilda, an' that he was comin' tu propose tu her."

"Gosh darn his buttons! Ef he comes foolin' 'round Tilda, I'll fix him, by gravy!"

"I swan, I won't stan' no outside feller comin' after Tilda!"

Thus said Josiah and Ab.

"Well, well. 'Tain't just the thing. But I'm afraid if this 'ere Philkins gits to see Tilda, she'll take him, boys," said Uncle Peter.

Then the subject was dropped as Aunt Tilda made her appearance. But before they went home that night Ab and Josiah asked Peter to tell them what Philkins looked like, and he described Blye, the lightning-rod agent.

Aunt Tilda noticed that Ab and Josiah were very friendly that night after she had left them alone with Peter, and she wondered at it. The truth was, the two "old boys" had made a common cause against the mythical Philkins.

The next morning Ab and Josiah came around very early, much to Tilda's surprise. Ab wanted to borrow a saw and

Josiah wanted to look over "The Clingville Weekly" for a month or so back, to find "a 'virtesment fer a mowin' machine." But they hung around the yard after they should have gone home, and Aunt Tilda ventured the remark to Maggie O'Tool:

"There's suthin' I don't know about goin' on atween them two, an' I 'spect Peter knows suthin' about it, for I saw him grin mighty knowin' when they came in."

The forenoon was well advanced when a man drove up to the gate in a buggy and got out and tied his horse.

Ab and Josiah sauntered to the gate and went out. Uncle Peter watched them from behind the woodshed.

"You're Philander Philkins, I s'pose, hain't ye?" said Ab, to the stranger.

"No, sir. I'm Mr. Blye."

"No you ain't, nuther, an' you can't come up here cuttin' Josiah an' me out, darn yeour buttons!" blustered Ab.

"I've no business with you. Stand aside. I am a-goin' into the house. If you don't look out, old fellow, you and I will have trouble."

"Darn yeour skin, that's what I'm here fur, as old Bill Jones used to say. Come on, Josiah!" cried Ab, and the next moment the two old boys seized the lightning-rod man, ran him into the horse-pond and ducked him in the mud and water until he was half drowned and yelled enough.

"Now, yeou git, an' don't yeou never come up here shinin' 'round Tilda Weatherall, or we'll drund yeou!" admonished Ab, and he let the discomfited lightning-rod agent go. The fellow made a run to his buggy and drove away as fast as his horse could go.

Aunt Tilda witnessed the scene and heard what was said. She came out of the house as the lightning-rod man rode away and Uncle Peter emerged from behind the woodshed roaring with laughter.

Uncle Peter had an interview with the postmaster next day, and an investigation resulted in the discovery of the dishonest clerk who had intercepted the letters of Howard and his friends, and he was discharged. Hereafter there was no more trouble with the mail.

A month later Ruth Everheart's father died, leaving her sole heiress to all his wealth.

Meanwhile Howard had been sober and industrious, and he had made good his promise to win his way. Mr. Rupert advanced him, and at Christmas time Howard and Happy Jack Saunders came to the old homestead. Howard and Ruth were reunited after their long severance, and a few months later they were married.

Howard ultimately became a successful merchant, and Happy Jack Saunders was his business partner.

Little Kit, the news girl, was not forgotten. Her father died of delirium tremens a month or so after Uncle Peter's visit to the city, and thereafter Howard provided for the little one and her mother. The latter came of a very respectable family, and that winter she received a legacy from an uncle which raised her above the reach of want.

Years later, when children of their own blessed the fire-side of the farmer's son, and happiness and prosperity had come to him and Ruth, a beautiful young lady and her talented husband visited them. No one would have supposed this lovely young bride was once a New York news girl, but she was really none other than little Kit.

Every summer Howard and Ruth return to the old New England homestead with their children and pass many happy days.

Ab and Josiah are still "sparking" Aunt Tilda, and making fun for the old folks and their visitors. But Nat Smudge and Maggie O'Tool followed the example of Howard and Ruth and were married.

Nat developed into an intelligent, honest farmer, and he and Maggie yet live at the old homestead.

THE END.

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